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OR, RED-HOT TIMES AT ROUND-UP.

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SOL," "THE SILVER SPORT," "THE DANDY
OF DODGE," "CAPTAIN CACTUS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

NADINE, THE CARD-QUEEN.

THE "Gold Mine" was doing a flourishing business. The presence, at the gaming tables, of the masked and mysterious Card-Queen was an attraction that the average citizen of Round-up could not resist. Even Nugget Jim, the ostensible proprietor of the establishment, could not fathom the mystery that clung about her. She was tall, queenly and presumably handsome, although no one there had ever seen her face. An

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MIT HIS FEED STICKIN' OFER."

icy dignity repelled curious questioning and easy familiarity.

Nevertheless, she had only been in the town a few days when Flavel Fox, an influential citizen and foreman of the "Double-Bar" cattle-ranch, called Nugget Jim to one side.

"Give her free swing!" he commanded, nodding toward the table at which she sat. "And, remember, that the man who insults her or makes himself in any way obnoxious has got to settle with me!"

"She is han'some; an' I don't blame you, boss!" Nugget replied, with a meaning smile. "Would 'a' tumbled head-over-ears myself, but I knowed it wouldn't do any good."

Flavel Fox frowned.

"Keep your tongue in your teeth, Nugget! You have your orders. Don't fail to remember them."

Nugget Jim kept his "tongue in his teeth," but he watched the Card-Queen night after night with eager curiosity.

"Blamed if I ain't fallin' in love with her myself!" he would mutter, dropping his eyes whenever she glanced toward him and bustling about with the trays and glasses, to hide his confusion. "I'd give a cool hundred to git a peep at her face onc't. I know she's got blue eyes an' is as purty as a pictur', fer her hair's yellor and her neck an' arms air as white as milk."

The story of the beautiful "card-sharp" spread far and wide; and nightly the "Gold Mine" was crowded with curious citizens, cowboys from the outlying ranges and miners from the adjacent mountains.

The other gambling houses of the town were almost deserted, and Nugget Jim rubbed his hands gleefully as the golden coins poured into his till in a constant stream.

"Worth five hundred a week to the shop!" he mused, as he glanced gloatingly from the heaped-up coin to the female sphinx.

One night he was treated to a genuine surprise. Quarrels were not infrequent in the "Gold Mine," but the Card-Queen, who had given her name as Nadine, had never interfered in these pleasant pastimes of the sporting fraternity. She had simply drawn her chair away from the dangerous vicinity, moved out of range of flying bullets, and when it was all over, and the dead and wounded, if any, had been dragged out, she had returned to the table, and taken up the game where it had been dropped.

What increased Nugget Jim's surprise was the character of the man in whose behalf she interposed.

He was a jolly and stoutly-built Dutchman, with laughing blue eyes, and a heavy mass of lint-like hair, and he came rolling into the saloon at a brisk gait, the long tails of his coat flapping against his legs, and his heavy shoes striking the floor with the springless "thud" of one accustomed to walking over plowed ground.

He wore a knit cap made of blue yarn, and ornamented at the peak with a dangling scarlet tassel. Taking a position at the bar, he pushed this cap back upon his head and surveyed the throng with an amazed and wondering stare.

"Uff I vhint me dot v heller in dhis crowd id voult dake a t'ousant mens!"

He gave utterance to his thoughts in an audible whisper, and twisted his face awry.

Nugget Jim had been watching him narrowly, and his keen ears caught the words.

"Who might you be looking fer, stranger?" he asked, tapping the Dutchman lightly on the shoulder. "Mebbe I kin pint him out."

"Oh, dot vhas you, eh?" facing around and looking the barkeeper smilingly in the face. "I t'ought me dot somepoty got hold uff my coat!"

"Yaw; I vhas looking oudt vhor mine brudder dot I don't see yit—Fritz Swentzel. He vhas yoost ploom grazzy mit dhis cowpoy pizness, and he zay dot he vhas going Vest to grow ub mit de hobbergrasses. You zee somet'ings uff dot v heller, eh? He vhas a leedle v heller, yoost apout so lonk und so vide"—indicating with his hands—"and he look oxactly like his brudder—vhich vhas me."

He beamed upon Nugget in such an innocent and confiding way that it almost touched the rascal's heart.

"He ain't hyer," Nugget declared, emphatically.

"No? I heert dot he come py dhis Rount-up down. Ve vhas singers togadder in de olt gountry. Maype you heert him:

"Oh, mine fadher, mine modher, mine sisder,
mine frau—
Ve all from de Vaterland came;
Und ve eads lager beer und ve drinks
sauerkraut—
Und ve used to do de same.
Tra-la, la-la-la, la-la-la—"

An angry growl from the crowd brought the song to an abrupt end. If it had been the Dutchman's aim to draw attention to himself he had certainly succeeded, for almost every eye in the room was turned upon him.

"Put the drunken fool out!" some one shouted. Flavel Fox, red with anger, and with a strange and startled look on his face, advanced toward the singer, with the intention of executing the order; but, the latter evidently had no notion of leaving. As Fox came forward he edged by him and darted to the other end of the apartment.

This movement brought him near the gaming table occupied by Nadine.

"Leap out of the window!" she whispered, as he hurried by.

The blue eyes of the German opened in wide surprise. He gave the Card-Queen one hasty glance, then wheeled about and faced his pursuer.

"Git out of this house, or I'll throw you out!" cried Fox, as he came up. "What do you mean by such performances, anyway? Your howling has put a stop to everything!"

"Id vhas mine brudder!" protested the German. "He vas yoost apout so lonk und so vide; und he sing like me und look like de tuyfel! I mean dot he look like me, und—"

Fox aimed a vicious blow at his head. It was deftly avoided; and the next instant the angry man measured his full length upon the floor.

How it was done no one could say. The Dutchman was seized with a sudden contortion; the air seemed filled with flying arms, legs and coat-tails, and Flavel Fox went over backward with a terrific crash.

As he struggled to his feet, tugging at his revolver, there was a general rush for the doors and windows. It appeared likely that bullets would fly, pretty soon, if the German showed fight, and the individual members composing the throng had no desire to interpose their precious persons as targets.

As for the Card-Queen, she was as calm and immobile as ever. Her eyes, gleaming through the mask, were fixed upon the fallen and struggling man.

"If you attempt to use that weapon, Flavel Fox, I'll put a bullet through your heart!"

Stern and threatening words they were and they came from her lips in a measured, icy way that left no doubt as to their meaning.

Flavel Fox was astounded beyond measure. What had the haughty Card Queen in common with this disreputable foreigner?

The German seemed equally surprised, and rolled his big, blue eyes about in a satisfied way.

"Uff I hat a sisder, now, I voult t'ink dot she vhas him!" he faltered, passing his right hand slowly and awkwardly across his breast. "So zhure as my name vhas Hans Swentzel, dot peats me! Id musd pe dot I am so hantsome as putif, und dot de young gyurls stick do me like molasses candy. Yaw; dot vhas id! She lofe me so dot she voult shood a mans py me!"

He glanced at her in a way to show her, as he hoped, his appreciation of so ardent an attachment.

"Stand out of the way, Nadine!" commanded Fox, sternly. "I will not tamely submit to such an insult!"

"If you must fight, go out in the street!" she replied. "You intended to murder this man and I could not calmly sit by and allow it. Now that he is aware of your intention perhaps he can hold his own. He will not, at least, be taken by surprise."

"From your black looks I can see that you think we are in collusion. You can ease your mind on that point. I never saw the man before and I don't care to see him again. But, even if we are in collusion it's none of your business. I am asking favors of no one. When I can't take care of myself I will go into a convent!"

Her eyes fairly flashed through the holes in the mask, and Fox cringed and cowered before her like a whipped spaniel.

"Now, go!" she cried, backing toward the nearest door. "I will play no more to-night. If you want to make the street musical with your revolvers, do so; but if you fire a shot in here I will call you to account for it!"

Flavel Fox arose and stumbled toward the street entrance; and the Dutchman followed him, fumbling at his ridiculous coat and muttering awkward and unintelligible sentences.

CHAPTER II.

KNOCKED OUT.

THE mind of Flavel Fox was in a feverish tumult, as he made his way toward the street

Suspicion, revenge, anger and fear tore and stabbed at him by turns.

Without any good reason he had, as soon as he heard the German's voice, jumped to the conclusion that the man's presence there boded danger. Yet, when he asked himself why he should think so he could not satisfactorily answer.

The confusion brought about by Hans's roaring song seemed to give an opportunity for sounding the fellow, and forcing a fight to the death if his suspicions proved well founded. The promptness with which his attack was repelled startled him. Had he been knocked down by an awkward but lucky blow, or would the Dutchman reveal himself as a ready fighter?

The unexpected interference of Nadine puzzled him beyond measure. Why should the queenly Sphinx champion the cause of this fellow against a man on whom she had lately looked with a favorable eye? Up to this night Fox had flattered himself that he was making an impression on the icy heart of the Card-Queen. She had been more than ordinarily gracious to him. She had seemed pleased and flattered with his attentions. She had even permitted him to kiss her hand. Was she, then, acquainted with this man who had called himself Hans Swentzel? If so, what was the bond of union between two such dissimilar characters?

If he killed this fellow, would Nadine receive him again into her favor? If he did not slay him, would not the fighting-men of Round-up look on him as a milksop and a lily-livered coward? He had, on more than one occasion, when in his cups, announced himself as a "chief." Would a "chief" calmly submit to the indignity that had been placed upon him?

At the thought his anger burned afresh, and he determined to kill the offending Dutchman, let the result be what it might.

The street was filled with a surging and struggling mass of men; and, as Fox made his appearance, this mass fell back and began to dissolve. It was apparently understood that blood would flow when the belligerents reached the open air.

Fox wheeled as he gained the steps, pitched his weapon quickly forward and fired. His intentions were deadly enough, but, the light shed by the coal-oil lamps used to illuminate the thoroughfare, was not of the best, and the bullet flew wide of its mark.

The Dutchman had evidently anticipated such a movement, for he had kept his body concealed as much as possible in the dense shadows.

Before the cylinder could revolve again the weapon was torn from the hand of Fox, and hurled far down the street. At the same instant Hans leaped forward like a cat, the momentum of the blow rolling them both together into the gutter.

Fox fell upon his face, with the Dutchman astride his back. His arms were doubled under him, and the left hand of his foe, grasping his neck, held his face in the dirt.

Then a comical sight was witnessed.

With a swift motion Hans, with his right hand, removed one of his ungainly shoes, and, raising it aloft, proceeded to use it on the prostrate man, as an irate mother uses a slipper upon a refractory child.

A torrent of words accompanied the rain of blows:

"You voult shood me, eh, like I vhas peen yoost a sneagkin' skyote! I subbose dhis vhas dhem gountry vat you reat apout, what shoosd mens vhor sbeakin' mit dhemselfs? Vhell, ve see how dot vhas, yit, a'ready!"

"I vhas a beaceable mans dot vhas lookin' vhor his leetle brudder, und my name vhas Hans Swentzel. When I sing dhem songs so putifal like him you shoomp ondo me like I vhas a gyaller pull-tog! You reecommember dot, eh? Uff nod, I vhill helb dot reegollection! Ah-h!"

"Dhis vhas Habby Hans vhat vhas dake a sead on der roof uff your pack, mit his feed stickin' ofer. When he vhas nod habby he vhas mat like a grazzy mans, und sbread himself out like a sblatter goon."

"You vheel somet'ings like dot now, eh? Dhem shoosd gid so hot poody quick dot id gatch afire uff you ton'd zay 'Quit dot!' You say him, eh?"

The humiliated man had been squirming and twisting like an eel under a pole. He had a knife in one of his pockets, but he could not get at it, and his utmost exertions were insufficient to break the hold of his antagonist.

He now gave an unintelligible grunt. This the Dutchman evidently interpreted as an acknowledgment of defeat, for he released the

prostrate man and sprung back to a safe distance.

Fox was furious with rage, and arose, snarling like a baffled hyena.

Grasping the knife, he started for the German at a dead run. It was the senseless charge of a man crazed and blinded by humiliation.

A blow from Hans's heavy fist again prostrated him.

"Give me a pistol, somebody!" the discomfited man yelled, as he scrambled up. "Give me a pistol!"

No one ventured to accommodate him. Not to be baffled, he snatched a revolver from the belt of the nearest bystander.

In doing so he momentarily turned his back on the man he hoped to slay. As he whirled again, cocking the revolver, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a rusty old derring.

Happy Hans had fished the weapon from a pocket of his ancient coat; and stepping quickly forward, covered Fox fairly, as the latter turned.

"Dot vhas a sweet goon dot you vhas now looking indo!" he asserted, his face taking on its old-time smile. "Uff you vill peeb town dot parrel you vhill zee dot pullet seddin' on dot bowlder like a plue hen a-seddin' on a nesdful uff plack eggs. Id vhas a lofely sight!"

"Dot vhas mine fadher's bistol vhat he vighd tuel mit in de olt gountry; und you may yoost pet id vhas a shooder!"

Wrathy as he was, Fox had too much sense to rush blindly upon that deadly, if rusty, weapon. The old derring carried a half-ounce ball, and a touch of the trigger meant death to whoever stood in the way of it.

A low titter assailed his ears as he stopped, hesitating. Evidently there were spectators who appreciated and enjoyed the ludicrousness of the situation.

Fox reddened to the roots of his raven hair. "You have the drop on me!" he acknowledged, awkwardly. "Luck is against me to-night."

He trembled like a leaf, as he made the humiliating confession. A desire for revenge burned in his heart, but he knew he must bide his time. Then, too, he had conceived a sudden and wholesome fear of the Dutchman's prowess. More than ever was it impressed on his mind that the green German was not all he seemed to be.

Fox had good cause to fear the bloodhounds of the law, and, more than once that night, he had asked himself if this man could be one of them. The thought seemed preposterous, but it came back now with redoubled force.

"I give in!" he continued, seeing that the German still kept him covered. "What more do you want?"

"I vhas afeart maype dot uff I led you loose doo soon you vout not reegolced me. I vhas looking vhor mine brudder. Uff you meed him you dell him dot you hafe seen me!"

Happy Hans backed slowly through the throng, holding the derring in readiness for any hostile movement. Then he dived into a side street and hastened rapidly from the dangerous vicinity.

CHAPTER III.

A SNARED FOX.

WHILE this singular combat was in progress, Nadine sat in the semi-darkness of her room, on the second floor of the building in which the "Gold Mine" was located.

The windows of the apartment overlooking the street, was partially raised and the words of the combatants came distinctly to her ears.

By leaning forward a little, a portion of the street, the excited crowd and the struggling men were dimly revealed.

Although the gloom concealed her movements and her face was still hidden by that impenetrable mask, it was not difficult to tell that she was interested in the result of the contest. Her finger-nails were pressed into the palms of her hands, one slippered foot tapped the carpet nervously, and her eyes glowed like living coals.

When the fight ended, and the German disappeared, she sunk back with a sigh of relief.

A half-hour later there was a gentle tap at the door.

She drew the curtain, turned up the light, and went to open it. Evidently she divined who was in waiting, for she grasped her little revolver in the folds of her dress, as she swung the door open.

"Ah, it is you!" she exclaimed, in her softest voice, as Flavel Fox entered. "After the events of the evening I hardly expected the honor!"

"You thought it might be some one else, eh?" he asked, jealously. "I didn't know you were in the habit of receiving visits from other gentlemen!"

She laughed lightly.

"There are women in the house you must remember! I might have been expecting the chambermaid."

Fox was not in a good humor, but he dared not exhibit his temper in the presence of the woman he imagined he loved. He knew that he did not appear to advantage. There was a black patch under his left eye and his face was bruised and swollen.

"To what happy circumstance am I indebted for this call?" she asked, waving him to a chair.

"I came up to have a quiet talk about that Dutchman—that is, if he is a Dutchman!" replied Fox, as he took the proffered chair.

"Why did you interfere in that little affair to-night? The evidence goes to show that he is an acquaintance of yours."

"Bah! If the evidence shows anything, Flavel Fox, it is that you are a coward!"

Her words were bitter with scorn.

She evidently knew how to manage him, for he dropped his overbearing manner at once.

"Come! come!" he urged. "It won't do for us to quarrel. There's been enough quarreling for one night. And you really don't know anything about the fellow? I could have taken my oath to the contrary, Nadine, when you interposed so promptly in his behalf."

"You know why I did!" she exclaimed, looking him squarely in the eyes. "For some reason, best known to yourself, you intended to kill him, without giving him any opportunity to defend himself. I saw it in your face, as you lay there on the floor. You ought to thank me for keeping your neck out of the hangman's noose."

"They don't hang a man, in this country, for killing another in self-defense."

He laughed horribly at his supposed wit. The crimson stain of murder had no terrors for him, if he could escape its penalty.

"No man is ever slain in Round-up, except in self-defense!" he continued. "Any other kind of killing would disgrace the town."

He checked his unseemly levity, noticing that it was disgusting her.

"It is a terrible place!" she exclaimed, toying with the leaves of a book. "I am almost sorry that I ever came here!"

"And would be quite, no doubt, if I wasn't here. Remember, Nadine, if you hadn't come I would never have had the honor and pleasure of your acquaintance. I hope you do not regret that?"

He drew his chair nearer and attempted to clasp her hand.

"I have no doubt that I wounded you deeply this evening, Nadine; but, believe me, it was done in the thoughtlessness of anger. A fierce wave of jealousy and rage swept over me when you took the part of that Dutchman."

"Jealous of such a creature!" Nadine chided. "Really, Mr. Fox, I am ashamed of you. Now, if it had been some young and handsome American!"

"It was foolish, Nadine!" he stammered, managing at last to grasp the evading hand. "I sincerely beg your pardon for harboring so ridiculous a thought. My excuse must be that I was half-insane at the time."

"But you cannot realize how I felt when you humbled me so publicly. Here I can kneel at your feet and confess my folly; but to be humbled in public, Nadine!"

"Oh, you old bear!" she cried, tapping his extended hand with her disengaged finger.

"You will not allow me to be angry with you when I try."

A pleased light came into his dark, crafty eyes.

"What man would have the woman he loves angry with him?" he asked. "True love cannot exist where there is anger."

She laughed lightly and mirthlessly.

"You remind me of a bread-and-butter school-boy, Mr. Fox! Such sentiments hardly become your years. Remember you have known me scarcely a week!"

"Long enough to know that I shall never love another woman as I now love you!" he averred, fervently.

"Nadine, I have a request to make. Two of them, in fact!"

The Card-Queen inclined her head in a listening attitude, her loosened hair almost sweeping his face.

"The first is, that you will never again publicly interfere in my quarrels. It is likely to cover me with ridicule."

"It is not probable that I will have any occa-

sion to interfere again!" she replied, slowly and thoughtfully. "But I cannot make any rash promises. I think too much of you, Mr. Fox, to permit you to commit cold-blooded murder in my presence."

"Yet, you threatened to slay me!" he protested.

"I thought that was settled!" she exclaimed, in a tone of annoyance.

"It is!" he hastened to assure her.

"Then, do not mention it again!"

He shrunk under her imperious manner, and became voluble with apologies.

"And you cannot promise that?"

"No; I cannot. I can only say this: So long as you draw the line at actual or intended murder I will not interfere."

"I will necessarily rest under a cloud after the events of to-night. It will be the talk of the town that you have thrown me over. Will you take pains to make it plain to the frequenters of the Gold Mine that such is not the case?"

"And is that question number two?"

"Only a continuation of question number one, my dear!"

"Ah! Still question number one? Yes; I will take pains to make that proposition plain. Is that more satisfactory than my other answer?"

"Very much more, Nadine! And it encourages me to proceed with question number two."

He pressed her hand gently and looked into her eyes.

"I would give all I am worth to have one view of your face. Will you not remove your mask an instant and favor me with that view?"

She started back in an alarmed way.

"I cannot!" she cried. "Not yet. After a little I will grant your request willingly; but not now."

"And why not?" he pleaded.

"I have a pug-nose! I am black! My face is covered with warts! Anything that will satisfy you!"

"And none of which are true!" he protested.

"Perhaps it's worse!" she exclaimed bitterly.

"I cannot do it, now. After a little I will."

"There is a deeper reason! Tell me, Nadine! I will not reveal it to any living soul."

She was silent for moment, and her breath came quick and hard. When she replied there was a grave sternness in her tones.

"Yes; there is a deeper reason! I am confident this mask will assist me in righting a very great wrong. What that wrong is I am not prepared to state. I am satisfied, however, that there is a man in this town who has injured me deeply. As the masked Card-Queen, drawing all classes to the gaming tables below, I hope to meet and expose that man. When I have done that, then I will tell you all."

"And is it something concerning an old love affair?" Fox asked, eagerly, his hot jealousy returning.

"Neither can I answer that, now!" she exclaimed, rising. "Mr. Fox, your question has awakened a host of bitter thoughts. So bitter, indeed, that I must bid you good-night."

She stood as if waiting for him to leave the room; and, seeing that nothing was to be accomplished by remaining, the wooer discreetly retired.

When the sounds of his footsteps had died away, she sunk into a chair, exclaiming:

"The old fool! I had to dismiss him in that unceremonious way to keep from betraying my secret!"

CHAPTER IV.

HAPPY HANS HAS A CALLER.

AFTER leaving the side street, Happy Hans struck off through the darkness toward the suburbs of the town, where he had secured a small room at a cheap and rather disreputable lodging-house. It was just such a place as a man of his apparent stamp and limited means would be most likely to select; for the reader needs scarcely be told that Happy Hans was not altogether what he seemed.

Once within his room, with the door securely locked and the faded curtain closely drawn he cast aside his knit cap and with it his assumed character. A smile irradiated his chubby face as he did so.

"I had no idea I would arouse the lion on such a short notice. The fox, I should have said, for he is certainly as suspicious and watchful as the animal whose name he has taken. Still, I don't think he penetrated my disguise, shrewd as he is."

"I didn't think that little song would create such a commotion, or I wouldn't have sung it. But I can't say, now, that I'm sorry. I intended it for other ears, but it started the game as

effectively as a blast from a hunter's horn. I was told that one of my old pards was in this section; and I knew if he heard that song he would at once make himself known. But I guess that is a mistake. He is probably over in Arizona, and I'll have to fight this battle out alone. Well, I'm ready and willing!

He seated himself on the little cot, and began to remove his cumbersome shoes.

"It's a good thing these shoes are handy to slip on and off!" he mused, laughingly. "I must have cut a ridiculous figure up there to-night! Anyway, I'll warrant I gave him such a blistering as he hasn't received since his school days. He'll not jump onto me again without giving the matter due thought beforehand. Those boxing and tripping tricks I learned long ago come in mighty handy on such occasions. No, he'll not attack me again in public; but he'll be likely to try to assassinate me. I must be on my guard against that."

He looked about the room as if questioning if it were possible for an enemy to reach him there, as he slept.

"I wonder who that masked woman can be, and why she interfered as she did? There is a mystery back of that that I must look into. She probably had some good and sufficient reason, which did not appear on the surface. And yet, she might have been impelled by the natural promptings of humanity. There are some men who, when there is a fight, always take the part of the under dog, from an instinct of chivalry. I suppose a woman might be influenced by the same feeling!"

He slowly disrobed; then crept into bed, placing a revolver convenient to his right hand.

For an hour the scenes and thoughts of the evening chased each other through his mind, then came the rest of forgetfulness.

He did not awake until a late hour, and when he went down to breakfast, the untidy room was almost deserted.

When he returned to the little cubby-hole which the proprietor of the house called an office, a stranger touched him on the arm.

Happy Hans looked into the stranger's face with a stare of surprise. He was a young man, rather under medium height, but well proportioned and handsome.

"Have you a room handy?" he questioned. "I want to talk with you on a matter of some importance!"

"Certainly! certainly!" opening his blue eyes widely. "I thought me maybe you must be mistaken by de mans. Mine brudder he look poody mooch like me, except he vhas nod quite so lunk und vide!"

"No; I never saw your brother—and I never saw you until last night. I was an interested spectator of the street fight and of the row in the saloon that preceded it. I must say you handled Flavel Fox superbly."

Happy Hans was expecting treachery and double-dealing and it at once occurred to him that the smiling and pleasant-voiced young fellow was one of Fox's spies. Could he have seen the figure lurking beyond the entrance his suspicions would probably have become certainties.

"Yoost dhis vay, uff you blease!" he commanded, dropping in behind the young man so that the latter would be compelled to precede him up the stairway. It was a dark and narrow passage and offered excellent opportunities for a villainous stab in the back.

Having gained the room he tendered the young man a broken chair and seated himself on another, taking care to interpose the table between them. But it was all done in so innocent and natural a way that it could not have aroused a suspicion of his real feelings in the mind of the craftiest.

Hans settled himself in his chair in a stiff and awkward manner and with a suppressed groan.

"Ach, mine goodness! I vhas dot steef und zore dhis morning dot I gan hartly ged up vhen I vhas standing town. Id musd pe dhose roomadicks vhat I gatch in de rain comin pack py me. I hafe dake more as a pushels uff qvine vhor dhose roomadicks, yit!"

The young man laughed in a hearty way that Hans could not help joining in with him.

"Your exertions last night were enough to make any man stiff. The only wonder is that you can walk at all this morning. I never saw such high-kicking off the stage!"

The Dutchman was evidently pleased at the compliment. His eyes twinkled, his mouth expanded in a broad grin and he was once more the honest and simple-minded rustic, large-headed and apparently without distrust.

"Yaw; dot vhas some bicnics, vhor zhure!"

Dot vheller, I dinks me, vhill subbose dot I am de drum-beader uff a prass-pand."

The young man smiled.

"I see you propose to stick to your character, under all circumstances! You are right, no doubt, for I remember now that I have not even introduced myself."

Plainly Happy Hans did not comprehend the full significance of the young man's statement, from the owl's way in which he stared at him.

"My name is King—Basil King; and I come to warn you to be on your guard against treachery. Flavel Fox is an extremely dangerous foe; and he will not rest until he has evened up the score against you!"

"Oh, dot vheller vhat I dake dhis shoon do, lasd nighd! You pet me he vhill keeb glean avhay vhor me hereafder! Dot vheller? Ach! He vas nod got so mooch vighd indo him as a bandy roosder. Uff he shoomp ondo me ag'in I vhill sbank him so dot his he't vhill gid sick py his sdomach."

"You do not seem to understand me. Mr.—What did I understand your name to be?"

"Hans Swentzel! Habby Hans; vhat is always habby when he is nod grazy mat like a zy-glone!"

"As I was going to say, Mr. Swentzel, you do not seem to understand me. In my opinion Flavel Fox will not again attack you boldly, unless forced to by public opinion. He has too great a regard for a healthy skin. But he will *waylay and murder you!*"

Happy Hans almost started from his chair at these portentous words.

"I come to tell you this and more: If you are only what you seem to be, the warning will at least be a kindness and will probably save your life. If, however, you are what I believe you to be, a detective in disguise, and on the track of this same Flavel Fox, it may serve you well by fully opening your eyes to the perilousness of your undertaking."

"Flavel Fox is, in many respects, the most dangerous man in this town. He has money and 'heelers' in abundance. He can and doubtless will, surround you with murderous spies. He is an unscrupulous villain and will stop at nothing to accomplish his ends."

"He has more power than he is generally credited with possessing. Ostensibly, he is only the foreman of the 'Double-Bar' cattle-ranch and a well-known citizen of this section. Really, he is the owner of the 'Gold Mine' saloon and gambling-hell. Nugget Jim is only his tool and puppet."

Happy Hans sat with his mouth open, an extremely puzzled look in his big, blue eyes.

"Vhy you tolt me all dhis, eh? How you vhint dhem oudt yourself? It makes me nodhings oudt uff he ownt de whole gountry! Vhy shoudt he be shyng about me? I vhas peen an honest mans unt I tolt him so uff I meed him ag'in. Id vhas mine leedle brudder vhat vhor I vhas hoonding. Dot leedle willain roon avhay vhor his home oudt and preak his modher's heart py dot cowpoy pizness; und uff I vhint him, so hellup me, I vhill vear bode uff dhem shoon oudt ondo him!"

"Do you mean to say that you are not now on the trail of Flavel Fox?"

The young man looked at him with earnest, questioning eyes.

"Vhor zhure, now, you make shokes py mel Vhat vhor voult I pe drailing dot vheller? Uff he led me alone I vhill nod ask him nodhings. Dot mans I neffer see a'ready dill yisderday. So hellup me cracious! dot is de troot!"

A look of admiration swept over the young man's face.

"I never saw the German character more admirably depicted, Mr. Swentzel—if that is your real name, which I don't think it is! You could make your fortune in light comedy!"

"Vhat you mean py dhose, eh?" Hans demanded his face slowly flushing, as if in anger.

"That you are not what you seem!" the young man returned, quite coolly. "It is admirably done, but it don't fool me."

"You mean dot I vhas a liar, eh?" shouted Hans, half-rising to his feet.

"Sit down!" quietly commanded the other, at the same time pushing his chair back as if he half-feared the German meant to launch himself at his throat. "I don't mean anything of the kind. I simply think that you are keeping up an assumed character, because you fear that I may be one of the spies of whom I have warned you. I don't know what measures I can adopt to convince you of my entire sincerity. I can only give you my word—the word of an honest man, if I do say it myself."

"My only aim is to aid you. I think I know what you are here for; and I assure you I am

in complete sympathy with you in the accomplishment of your object."

Hans had sunk back into the chair, and now glared at his visitor with a look of hopeless perplexity.

"And do you still insist that you don't understand me?" amazedly, and with a gesture of impatience.

"Uff dot ain'd a grazy mans, so hellup me I neffer see one yit!"

This was in an aside, as he began to "walk" his chair back toward the window.

"I vhas heert apout how dhose vbellers dhink dhay vhas somepody's elses, und dot some other vbellers vhas him."

Then, raising his voice as if talking to a deaf man:

"You vhas off uff your pases, my young frient. I vhas nod in de tetective pizness; neidher vhas I drailing anypody but mine brudder. Uff somepody tolt you dot, you dell'em do zay dot do de mareeners. Uff I dake gare uff my ownselluf I dinks me, py sheminy, I do a poody goot pizness in dhis Reund-ub down!"

Basil King had arisen, and now advanced toward him, as if for the purpose of making a last appeal.

"You keeb avhay, now, I tolt you!" cried Hans, leaving his chair and backing toward the window.

This he threw up as soon as he reached it, and seemed on the point of leaping headlong into the street.

A shade of disappointment swept over the young man's face. This was too perfect, he thought, for mere acting.

He halted and turned toward the door.

"Whatever you are, Mr. Swentzel, I see that I have accomplished all that it is possible for me to accomplish. I have one satisfying thought, anyway. Don't forget it, whether you are detective or Dutchman: Look out for treachery and assassination at the hands of the spies and emissaries of Flavel Fox!"

With this warning he pulled the door to after him and clattered down the narrow stairway.

CHAPTER V.

A CONFERENCE.

A MEETING, in which the conversation was earnest and animated, was held that night, in a small room communicating with the gaming-hall of the Gold Mine. The windows of this room opened on a little garden at the rear of the building.

The hour was late, and a number of men were present, among them Flavel Fox and Nugget Jim.

The latter was speaking; and from the eager way in which the others bent forward to listen, his subject was an interesting one.

"I spotted the place where the feller is hangin' out, early this mornin'. One of the boys tipped me word that he'd seen him at a certain house in the lower part of town and I went down there."

"I stayed around outside, smokin' an' talkin', until I seen him go in to breakfast; then I kep' my eyes and ears wide open."

"You know the feller that's been hangin' about hyer fer a month er so, sparkin' Fanny half the time? A reel nice chap I allus thought him! Well, gents, I heard him sayin' things this mornin' that jist about stood my hair on end. He's a snake, if they ever was one!"

"Well, this chap, Basil King, walked by me, without ever seein' me, and went into the office of the hash-house. I didn't think nothin' purtickler of that, fer I never 'spicioned him. If he'd 'a' seen me I'd expected him to speak to me, but I had my hat pulled over my eyes an' my back to him, and he passed on. Even then I come mighty nigh tellin' him 'howdy,' which would 'a' knocked the fat in the fire shore enough."

"When this Dutch galoot got through eatin' an' come out, Basil walked up to him as familiar as you please and tapped him on the arm."

"Ruther surprised Dutchy, I jedged, from the way he looked."

"Have you got ary room clost?" said Basil. "I've got somethin' powerful purtickler to say to you!"

"I can't jist tell you what the Dutchman said, 'cause I can't git the twist jist right to my tongue. But any way I could see he was spicious and didn't like the feller's looks. I'm certain that he'd never seen him before and mebbe he thought Basil was goin' to try to rob him."

Then, with a plentiful sprinkling of epithets and low slang, Nugget Jim proceeded to tell how he had followed the pair up the narrow stairway and concealed himself near the door.

There he had heard all that had passed; and by gluing an eye to the key-hole had also been able to see as well as hear.

When Basil King left the apartment with such precipitation the spy had only time to crowd himself against the wall, in the deepest shadows.

"It was a narry escape," he explained, "and fer a minute I thought I'd have to show my hand with a pistol in it!"

"This is a serious affair!" observed Fox, when Nugget Jim had concluded. "Basil King is a man I had never suspected."

"And you think the Dutchman is the genuine article, after all?"

"I'd take my davy on it!" Nugget Jim asserted, positively. "I watched the feller like a cat. If he'd been playin' a game he couldn't 'a' helped showin' some signs of it, the way Basil came at him. Stiddy that he got roarin' mad; and finally skeered. I do believe he thought Basil was a lunatic; an', fer a minute, I thought he was a-goin' to jump smack out o' that window. An' it would 'a' killed him certain, fer there's a car-load o' broken stone jist under it."

"I wish he had!" growled Fox. "Then there could have been no possible danger from him in the future. For in spite of what you say, Nugget—and by that I don't want you to understand that I'm disputing your word in the least—I can't help feeling that he will be the thorn in our flesh before a great while."

"Ever' man's a right to his opinion!" insisted Nugget, doggedly. "I have mine, an' other men's free to think as they please. I ain't got no furdur fears o' that Dutchman. I can't say, though, but I might have, if he should paddle me one't!"

Fox did not appreciate the thrust; but he said nothing. Nugget Jim was too valuable a man to unnecessarily offend.

For a time he sat with his head buried in his hands, as if in deep thought.

"Where did King go, after he came out of there?" he asked, finally.

"I didn't think it'd be of any benefit to foller him!" replied Nugget. "An', in fact, I had already collared about as much information as I could well carry!"

"Yes; you did well!" approvingly. "The question now is how to utilize it!"

"If you mean by that, what would you do about it, I say, knife him?"

"Basil King?"

"Yes; the quicker you put him out of the way the better! He knows too much for our good. How'd he find out I wasn't the owner o' the Gold Mine?"

"I don't know, unless you told him. I am sure I haven't said anything about it to any one."

"Same hyar; and yit he knows it. Knowed too, that you had spies after the Dutchman. How'd he find that out so confounded quick? What else he knows I ain't any idee. Ever'thing, likely!"

"Did you gain any notion frum what he said as to why he wanted to help Dutchy, in case he was what he thought him?" asked one of the men.

"Yes; that's a point worth investigating!" assented Fox. "Why should Basil King wish to take a stand against me at all? I'm sure I have always treated him well!"

"An' ain't I allus give him as much liberty in the Gold Mine as if he was a king, sure enough?"

"Blast him! His talk skeered me this mornin'! Now, it makes me mad!"

"But you haven't answered Tom's question!" suggested Fox.

"No; I didn't git any idee at all on that p'int. He didn't say, as I remember. Told Dutchy that he was with him ag'inst you. Didn't say why. I reckoned, mebber, you'd downed him at the card-table er somethin'."

"Never played a game with him in my life. In fact, I don't recollect that I ever saw him at the gaming tables."

"Too busy chinnin' Miss Fanny!" growled Nugget. "You bet, I'll stop that!"

The discussion extended to a great length, but no further points were developed worth recording. Two decisions were arrived at. One was that Happy Hans was to be placed under strict surveillance. The other that Basil King must be slain.

It was not known just what the latter's aims were. But enough had been learned to convince them that he was a dangerous man. His attentions to Fanny, it was argued, were merely a blind to give him a plausible excuse for haunting the Gold Mine, both in season and out of season.

As for the German, if a strict watch showed that he was not playing a double game he would

be allowed to go unmolested. Otherwise a similar fate would be meted out to him.

Truly these were desperate men, by whom a human was held as lightly as the turning of a card.

"King will no doubt visit the Gold Mine tomorrow night!" said Fox, rising to depart as the conference terminated. "That is not certain, though, for he does not always come, and never until it is very late. That will better suit our purpose, however, than if he kept earlier hours. There will be fewer people liable to make an awkward interference."

"You will have charge of the pleasant affair, Nugget. And remember that no mistakes must be made. Get the right man and get him dead to rights."

The scoundrel seemed pleased at the trust reposed in him.

"Count on me, boss! I never make a break in a little thing like that."

They filed slowly out into the almost deserted gaming room. Then each went his own way, with mind filled with thoughts of the bloody deed contemplated.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "GOLD-MINE'S" ANGEL.

A SERIES of untoward and cruel circumstances had placed pretty Fanny Elgin beneath the roof of the "Gold Mine." She was not at all the kind of girl one would expect to find in such a place; and, too, her position there was rather an anomalous one. She was neither cook, waitress nor bar-maid; and yet her duties occasionally included all of these. She was, in fact, a sort of privileged servant, on whose shoulders devolved many of the responsibilities of housekeeper and proprietress.

Her father had been engaged in mining in the Raton Mountains, whose frowning heights occasionally cast their shadows into the very streets of Round-up. A truer, braver heart than Old John Elgin's never beat beneath a ragged jacket. Yet fickle fortune seldom smiled on his efforts. He lacked the ability to make money, or to keep it when once it was earned. He was honest, truthful and industrious, but a noticeable unfixeness of purpose handicapped him in the battle for bread.

During the later years of his checkered career his daughter Fanny had clung to him and cared for him. Then a fall of rock in a drift had ended his life and cast her out upon the world, friendless, penniless, and alone.

For months her struggles to secure an honest living in that wild, rough country, required a courage that almost amounted to heroism. But by slow degrees she conquered, gaining alike the respect of friends and enemies. Then came the offer of the position she now held in the Gold Mine.

At first she had recoiled from its acceptance. But the loss of a situation and the pinchings of financial distress induced her to change her mind. There was no reason why, she argued, she could not retain her own self-respect and honor in that establishment as well as elsewhere, if she resolutely set her face against the evil that would necessarily surround her.

And she succeeded. Not only that, but by her kindness, tact and evident good-will, she compelled the respect and admiration of every one. In some cases, even, this feeling went beyond mere admiration; and there were a plentiful sprinkling of men in Round-up who would not have hesitated to slay the individual that dared breathe a word against the purity of her character.

She had not been there a great while until some one playfully alluded to her as the "Gold Mine's Angel," and the title seemed so strikingly appropriate that it at once went into general use.

And an angel she really seemed, compared with the people around her and with the class that haunted the bar-room and gaming-tables. Even if her reputation had not been as unsullied as it was, her striking beauty would have justified the appellation. She was handsome, *petite* and graceful; a decided brunette, with a clear complexion, a dainty rosebud of a mouth, eyes that held both laughter and tears, and a silken glory of glossy hair.

This morning there was a look of unwonted seriousness on her mobile features, as she stood behind the bar. The room was deserted; for it was not the time of day most affected by bibulous souls. She had halted in her task of putting things to rights, and was now staring abstractedly into vacancy.

Her sleeves were pushed above her dimpled elbows, her abundant hair was drawn back and pinned in a becoming coil, giving to her head a

statuesque outline, and her short skirts revealed a pair of as dainty feet as ever graced lovely femininity. Altogether she presented a picture worthy of the study of an artist or a lover of the beautiful.

The air of serious abstraction vanished, as a step was heard in the entrance, and she turned again to her work.

The footsteps entered the bar-room and she looked up, only to meet the admiring gaze of Flavel Fox.

There was something in his gaze or his manner that caused her to flush hotly and bend more assiduously to the task at which she was engaged.

Flavel Fox was a man of low and evil instincts, and the handsome picture the girl had presented had temporarily aroused some of the basest passions of his nature. He was forced to acknowledge that he had never seen her looking quite so handsome; and for the time being she quite drove out of his thoughts the vision of the stately and queenly Nadine.

Her confusion was only temporary, and when he addressed her in his usual polite and oily manner, she arose to greet him with such an air of quiet self-possession that he was driven into the belief that the flush was wholly due to the exertion of stooping.

"A lovely morning!" he ventured, suddenly finding his position a strained and awkward one.

"Yes; but a damp cloth and a dust-brush doesn't give one much time for admiring it. I suppose the sun rises every morning in the old-time way, but my duties prevent me from testifying to it from personal knowledge."

Unwittingly her speech opened up the very channel of communication he was seeking.

"And, yet, Miss Fanny, I notice that you usually find plenty of time to devote to your handsome cavalier, Basil King. But I don't blame you. That's the way of the world and of womankind. And he is a nice fellow. For some reason I find that I have taken quite a liking to him."

He watched her narrowly, hoping to read her thoughts. A desire to know whether King had revealed his knowledge to Fanny was the impelling motive that brought Flavel Fox into the bar-room.

"Still I don't know but you might find more worthy suitors. King is, as I have said, a nice fellow, but from all appearances he is miserably poor."

"Which, I suppose, you think is sufficient cause that I should discard him?"

"No; not exactly that! But you know, Fanny, that our likes and dislikes, our loves and hates, are largely matters of chance; or, more correctly speaking, are governed by circumstances over which we have some control."

"For instance: To prove my proposition, suppose that you had never met or heard of Basil King! You could neither like nor dislike him. To you he would be as though he did not exist. Now, we can to a large extent control our meeting and acquaintanceship. You became acquainted because you chose, or rather, did not refuse to do so."

"If you had resolutely set your face against that and formed only the acquaintance of eligible gentlemen no doubt you could have met some one who has a substantial bank-account and whom you would love none the less sincerely for that."

"And thus become a fortune-hunter or an adventuress! Thank you for your good opinion of me, Mr. Fox!"

There was a tinge of sarcasm in the tones.

"Besides, what chances would a girl in my position have, even if she were base enough to look at her advantages from that light?"

"An abundance of them, Miss Fanny! I once thought of shying a castor into the ring myself, and would have done so, no doubt, if King hadn't put in an appearance. Don't look so startled, for it's a fact."

He noticed her look of amazement and dismay, but hurried on without giving her a chance to speak.

"Now, I am not so poor, Fanny, as you may think. I have some money and lands and am foreman of the 'Double-bar' Ranch, at a good salary."

"And owner of the Gold Mine?" he expected to hear her say; but was disappointed.

That was a fact that Fanny Elgin was fully aware of, but she saw the trap in time to avoid it.

Now that she had fathomed the undercurrent of his thoughts and fully understood his motives, she had nothing further to fear and became chatty and jocular.

"No doubt you're a good catch, Mr. Fox, but I don't think so."

Fox was rather taken aback. He saw that a new wind had caught her sails, but could not account for the change.

"And why not, pray?" he half gasped.

"Well, you must understand that I don't wish to offend you or wound your feelings," she replied, laughingly, "but I don't like it. It's too suggestive of qualities that I can't appreciate."

Fox winced, for this was a direct thrust, and he knew it. However, he could not afford to exhibit anger.

"Perhaps I have a better, if I would only lug it out."

"I was going to suggest that, Mr. Fox, if you had only given me time. And then, there is another reason: You have already a sweetheart."

"Who? Nadine? Well, she is a clever woman, and no doubt handsome—for I have never seen her face—but she is not my ideal of a life-companion."

He unconsciously lowered his voice, as if he feared the Card-Queen might hear him.

"What, Mr. Fox! Has the sun spots on it? Fie! fie! Now, I'll warrant you wouldn't say that to Nadine herself."

"Well, maybe I wouldn't," Fox confessed.

"I like Nadine, after a fashion. But you, Fanny, come nearer to the mark."

"Now, don't put your hands up to your ears in that silly way, for I'm in earnest. I didn't really know how good-looking you were until I came in here a little while ago. It was a revelation."

The look that boded peril to her had returned to his eyes.

"Don't talk to me that way, Mr. Fox," she pleaded.

"You will allow me to joke, but I mustn't get in earnest! Is that it? Well, now, Fanny, I don't see why you should repel my advances. I am in earnest, I assure you. I mean every word I say. I tell you frankly, you are the prettiest woman in Round-up."

He attempted to clasp her hand, but she quietly withdrew it.

"If you knew how much you are distressing me, Mr. Fox, I am sure you would not talk that way," she protested, her breast heaving, and a flash of indignation coming into her fine eyes.

"But you must listen to what I have to say," he persisted. "I want you to think of me as a would-be lover, anyway. I have money in abundance and if you choose to accept my attentions you may dress as fine as any lady in the land."

He bowed himself away as he said this, leaving her trembling and crimson with anger and humiliation.

"I will be compelled to leave this place at once," she exclaimed, in an anxious and agitated voice. "To remain will be to place myself at the mercy of that wretch. I was tempted to tell him what I really know of him. But it is not time for that yet. If I had done so his expressed regard for me would, no doubt, have changed into a desire to assassinate me."

She placed the cloth and dust-brush on a convenient shelf, surveyed her flushed face in a tiny mirror, and then fled to the upper regions of the house.

CHAPTER VII.

A WARNING.

THAT afternoon Basil King received a letter that rather startled him. It was from Fanny Elgin; and in it she stated that his life was in imminent peril and that, in consequence, he must make arrangements to immediately leave the town. It also contained a hint that she intended to sever her connection with the Gold Mine, and asked him to meet her that night at a place named, for a parting interview. The letter was thoroughly despairing in tone, but breathed the warmest sentiments of affection.

The young man stood like one dazed, as he slowly read it again and again.

He at once leaped to the conclusion that the peril, if any, threatened from the direction of the Gold Mine itself. Perhaps Fox had learned of his visit to Happy Hans.

"Fanny has heard something of a startling character," was his comment. "It may be that she is unduly alarmed, but she has heard something; and whatever it is I'll wager a pretty penny that Fox is at the bottom of it. But what can she mean by intimating that she intends to quit the place? Leave the town? Well, not much, unless I'm forced to!"

He was in a fever of impatience the remainder of the afternoon, and more than once was on the point of going boldly to the Gold Mine for

the purpose of learning the cause of Fanny's sudden alarm. But the tone of the letter restrained him.

The place of interview was near the rear gate that opened from the garden toward the mountains.

Promptly, at the appointed time, King set out for this gate. When he reached the garden he found that Fanny was there in advance of him.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came!" she whispered, as she nervously clasped his hand.

"Why, what's up?" he asked, sinking into a seat by her side. "Your letter was enough to give one the shivers!"

"Speak as low as you can, please!" she urged.

"I saw some men out there awhile ago. I am afraid they were dogging your footsteps. If so, and we remain quiet, they may not discover us in here."

"Why should they follow me?" he asked anxiously.

"They intend to murder you, Basil!" she whispered, slowly and impressively. "I heard them plotting it. Oh, it was awful, and I could scarcely keep from screaming out."

"Late last night, as I was passing along the rear of the gaming-hall on my way up-stairs, I heard your name mentioned. I stopped to listen and found there were a number of men in the little back room and that they were talking about you."

"I couldn't hear very distinctly from where I was. So I removed my shoes, and crept out into the garden and crawled up under one of those windows. The men were Flavel Fox, Nugget Jim and a number of the rough fellows that are always hanging around here."

"They had been talking for some time I judged, but I heard enough to know that Nugget Jim had tracked you to the room of the German, when you went to visit him, and had heard all you said there. And it made my heart stand still, Basil, when Fox said that you knew too much for their good and that you must be—be—put out of the way!"

She leaned her head, upon his shoulder and fairly sobbed out the last words.

King was shocked and alarmed, but he placed his arm about her waist, drew her to him and endeavored to comfort her.

"The matter has a serious look!" he was forced to confess. "But the danger may not really be so great, Fanny, as it seems."

"And when I saw those men out there," she continued, convulsively, "I expected every moment to hear the report of revolvers and see you fall. Oh, Basil, this is terrible; and I know I cannot rest nor sleep a wink until I learn that you are safe out of the town!"

"I ought to have urged you to leave at once on receipt of my letter, and am sorry now that I did not. But I couldn't bear the thought of your going away without a 'good-by,' when perhaps I would never see you again."

She was weeping bitterly, her slender form quivering like a leaf.

"And to-day, Basil, Fox came into the bar-room where I was at work and by artful sentences tried to entrap me up into telling him if you had ever spoken to me of what you told the German. And not only that but his manner was such that I can no longer remain in that house."

King felt that his situation was one of unknown peril; and even while his sweetheart talked he shifted his position long enough to enable him to draw a revolver and place it convenient to his hand.

"I don't see how I can leave the town, now," he said, "when so much depends on my remaining. You know what I refer to, Fanny, and know that it is important that I should be here. Especially at this time, when a day may accumulate sufficient evidence to enable me to unmask the whole case!"

"Oh, you must leave!" she insisted. "Tonight! For a time, at least! Your life is worth more than money, and I know from what I heard last night that they fully intend to kill you."

"No doubt of that, I guess, if they get the opportunity. But I am good at disguising, and can remain right here and defy them to find me. You look up another place, and I promise I will communicate with you and visit you in such a costume that you would never recognize me, if I did not reveal my identity."

"I ought to have thought of that when I visited the German. It was a piece of short-sightedness for which I alone am to blame. But it's too late now for regrets. All we can do is to look out for the present and prepare for the future."

"And do you really think it will be safe to do that? Will they not watch me, and entrap you that way?"

"That would be the only chance they would have. I think, though, I can devise a plan that will even baffle them there."

"If you only can!" she exclaimed.

The hope that he would not be compelled to leave the town was a very cheering one. She was willing and anxious to submit to it, to insure his safety; but if the necessity could be obviated it would be very pleasant, she thought. None of us like to have our loved ones forced from our side.

"I am sure it can be done!" he asserted, cheerily. "In fact, it is quite practicable. I can see you occasionally as a book-agent, or a peddler of unconsidered trifles, or even as a dealer in old junk and garbage. There are many ways in which the thing can be worked."

"And now that you feel more contented on that point, tell me what your plans are?"

"I have none!" she answered, dejectedly. "I must leave this place, and I hardly know where to go. I have a few acquaintances in the town, and perhaps I can stop with them until I can secure another position."

"Would you be offended if I should offer the loan of a small sum of money?"

"Not offended, Basil. You know me better than that. I know your motives are pure and honorable. But I couldn't accept it. I will manage in some way!"

"It will not be long, I trust, until you will stand before the world as my wife!" he said, pressing a kiss upon her cheek. "Then I will have the right to care for you and fight your battles. As soon as this miserable business is settled I shall insist upon an immediate wedding."

She nestled closer to him, as if for protection from the storms that threatened to rage about her; and again he kissed her face and smoothed back her glossy hair.

For an hour they sat there, talking of the past and present, and building airy castles for the future, as lovers will, almost forgetting the threatening danger that lurked so near.

Then, with many apologies for his thoughtlessness in detaining her so long in the cool, night air, he arose to take his departure. She walked with him down to the gate, and there they remained another ten minutes.

"I must really go!" he exclaimed, at last, as if it cost him an effort to tear himself away from her. "Good-night and good-by until I see you again."

A sudden growling, as if from the throats of a score of leashed bulldogs, broke upon the stillness of the night, and a number of masked men leaped out at them from the dense shadows.

"Take the girl, too!" commanded one.

Fanny was frozen and numbed with a horrible fear.

A spout of fire and a report from Basil's revolver aroused her, and she sent one frantic scream after another along the deserted streets.

The shot was responded to by others, revolvers were clubbed and knives flashed, and Basil King slipped heavily to the earth, dying or dead, as the unhappy girl fully believed.

Then there was a rush of men from the rear of the gaming-room, together with excited shouts, calls and exclamations.

In the midst of it all, Fanny was seized by rough and brutal hands, and hurried away.

CHAPTER VIII.

MELCHIZEDECK MEEK.

It was not Fox's original intention to have Fanny Elgin carried away. That followed as the result of the events of the afternoon.

From the hour that Basil King's death was determined on, he was beset by spies and informers. Every movement he made was observed; and, if deemed of importance, news of it was quickly transmitted to the Gold Mine.

Consequently, the warning letter from Fanny Elgin had not been in his possession a half-hour, until a knowledge of the fact with some idea of its import was conveyed to Flavel Fox.

The arch-scoundrel at once decided that she must also be shadowed; and found little difficulty in securing tools ready to his purpose.

When she went to the appointed place of meeting, in the little garden near the rear entrance, her movements were noted, and the informers concealed themselves in the shadows just beyond. Here they met the men who were dogging the footsteps of Basil King, and notice of the interview between the lovers was quickly conveyed to Flavel Fox, who was, at the time, in the bar-room of the Gold Mine.

"Kill him and carry her to the rendezvous in

the mountains!" was the brutal order. "If she doesn't know all about the affair now, she will before that meeting ends. A man can't keep so weighty a secret from the woman he loves. From the looks of affairs this afternoon, I am almost convinced, anyway, that she is a spy on our movements."

Then, as the messenger departed, he resumed his cigar as nonchalantly as if a thought of wrong-doing had never entered his cruel mind.

The reader knows how the order was carried out.

"Curse her! Throw that blanket over her head afore she wakes the town!" growled the man who carried Fanny, as another scream escaped her lips. "She yells and fights like a wild cat!"

They were hurrying along in the shadows of the houses toward the point where horses had been left in waiting.

The command was complied with, and the enveloping folds of the heavy blanket rendered futile the struggles of the terrified girl.

The horses were reached after a short run. One was a large and powerful animal. To the back of this the man clambered, and Fanny was again placed in his arms.

Then the little cavalcade dashed away, heading straight for the Raton Mountains, heedless of the tumult they were leaving behind them.

When they gained the open country the horseman removed the suffocating blanket and commanded the girl to sit on the withers of the animal, in front of him. Here he held her in position with one powerful arm, as they galloped steadily onward.

Fanny was faint, frightened and sick at heart. She believed that Basil King was dead; and it appeared that the fate in store for her could not be but a horrible one.

Yet she did not faint or lose consciousness. Gradually, however, a benumbing sensation crept over her. It seemed a feeling akin to nightmare. The events of the evening took on the coloring of some horrible dream. The voices of the men at her side and the clatter of the horses' feet had a distant and indistinct sound. The movements of the steed that carried her assumed a swinging character and she appeared to be floating through space.

But she soon came out of this dreamy state into a full realization of the actual terrors of her position. And they were certainly sufficient to appall the stoutest heart!

Terrible as they were, she tried to face and comprehend them in all their horrible reality. Perhaps the situation was not as bad as it appeared. Basil might not have been slain! A way of escape might open, even before the dawning of another day! There was a ray of hope, as there nearly always is, and she endeavored to extract from it as much comfort and cheer as possible.

A ride of two or three hours brought them to some sort of human habitation. It was a half dug-out, half log-house, and contained two cheerless rooms. It was unoccupied, and the men took possession of it as if they felt themselves at home.

The back room was assigned to Fanny, and very grateful was she to escape from the rude gaze and boisterous company of those semi-savage men.

She found the room almost bare of furniture; but there was a hard cot in one corner and an old box that could be made to serve for a seat. To this box a candle had been glued by a liberal application of melted tallow; and its ghostly light served to partially illuminate the apartment.

She was stiff and fatigued from the long ride and the uncomfortable position she had occupied on the horse, and her mind ran riot with painful thought and conjecture. She feared also to trust herself to sleep, even if sleep were possible. Nevertheless she sought a comfortable position on the cot and after a time drifted into troubled and restless slumber.

When she awoke the sun was high in the heavens, showing that she had slept for hours. Voices came from the other room—which she thought at first were the voices of the men who had brought her there.

Her movements caused a cessation in the conversation. After a little a man came to the door, peered in, and, seeing that she had arisen, threw the door open and propped it with a boulder.

He was an old man, with long, flowing, white hair and venerable beard. There was only one other man in the house, and he was an Indian, with a cruel, repulsive face and garments that were indescribably greasy and filthy.

"Ah, my dear, you are up, I see!" the old

man exclaimed, in a high, cracked voice, at the same time combing his long beard with his fingers. "Glad to see you looking so well."

The hope that had sprung almost full-armed into the girl's breast, died, as that squeaky voice fell on her ears. It seemed assumed, crafty and hypocritical.

"Your escort of last night is gone!" he continued, interpreting her questioning look. "They only waited until my arrival and then returned to the town."

"But I forget! I haven't introduced myself. My name is Meek—Melchizedeck Meek—and I am by occupation a mustang-catcher. This man is Red Joe, my assistant."

Before Fanny could reply, he hobbled away, soon returning with a small pail of water and a rusty and leaky tin wash-basin.

"These poor accommodations are, I regret to say, the best my house affords!" he explained, apologetically. "I once had a little oval mirror, but Joe took it for a neck-pendant and smashed it while climbing over the rocks."

"This will do very well!" she replied. "And now, Mr. Meek, may I ask you why I am held here?"

"The water will all run out of that basin, if you stop to ask questions!" he urged, pointing to the pool that was rapidly forming on the earthen floor.

In answer, Fanny coolly took up the basin and tossed the water through the open window.

"There is more water in the pail, and I can wait. I am much more anxious to know why I am held here."

"Rather unceremonious treatment!" he said, in a tone of reproach. "But I will answer your question. You are detained here for your own good."

"In what way?" with scornful and questioning doubt.

"You are aware, I suppose, Miss Elgin—for I have been given to understand that is your name—that you have numerous friends in Round-up. Friends who are deeply interested in your welfare. It became known to them that you were in extreme danger of committing an act of irrevocable folly; and they placed you here to keep you from that."

Fanny fairly gasped with surprise. Was it possible that this old man had been deceived by Flavel Fox as to the true motives that prompted the abduction?

"And what was that folly, pray?"

"A hasty and ill-advised marriage with a young man named King!"

"And they led you to believe that?"

She asked the question, but had previously answered it in her own mind. The sniffling air that Meek had just then assumed, branded him unmistakably as a hypocrite.

"They certainly did, Miss Elgin!"

"Well, it's false. I was not brought here for any such reason. You heard that from Flavel Fox, I suppose?"

"Flavel Fox is a very great friend of yours!" he answered, crossing his hands demurely.

"So is the hawk the friend of the dove! Flavel Fox is a base scoundrel and a murderer!"

Meek recoiled a step, for there was a look of almost insanity in her eyes as she made the assertion.

"Yes, a murderer! And as sure as there is a just God in Heaven, he will reap a righteous harvest of punishment."

"You do Mr. Fox a great wrong, my dear. He is certainly your friend."

"Then I will have to pray to be delivered from my friends, Mr. Meek, for a greater villain never went unbung!"

So passionate was her outburst that even the Indian, stolid as he was, stirred uneasily.

"Mr. Meek, from your air and manner, I judge that you profess to be a just man."

Meek bowed and again crossed his hands.

"Yes, Miss Elgin! I trust that I am! I was at one time a minister of the gospel, but fortuitous circumstances lost me my pastorate. I come, also, of good family, and received quite a liberal education, and hoped at one time that I would be able to pass my declining years in the midst of the enjoyments and blessings of civilization. But my lot has been ordered otherwise, and I try to be content."

"One will, though, Miss Elgin, naturally look back with longing to the flesh-pots of Egypt. No matter how we mortify the flesh, it is hard to rid ourselves of our natural dispositions and inclinations."

"But, as I said, I try to be content; and in the afternoon of my life I am endeavoring to make an honorable living as a catcher of wild horses. It is an humble calling, but it has its compensating advantages. The life is almost

wholly an out-door one, and I am thus freed from many ailments that might otherwise annoy me."

The old man seemed about to continue his garrulous remarks, when Fanny interrupted him.

"As a just man and a Christian, will your conscience and your sense of duty permit you to retain me here at the instigation of such a wretch as Flavel Fox? A man who is truly a Christian would not lend himself to such an outrage; for the Golden Rule is the essence of true Christianity!"

Evidently Melchizedeck Meek had the hide of a rhinoceros, for the stroke did not even cause him to wince.

"We will argue that later, Miss Elgin. At present I haven't time. Your breakfast is getting cold. So if you will kindly proceed with your ablutions, I will order Red Joe to place it on the table. As for myself, I have a large number of wild horses, yearlings and colts mostly, corraled in the pasture below; and, as they are to be branded to-day, I must look after them!"

He reached for a knotted cane, and without further words left the house.

It was not pleasant to be left there with that villainous-faced Indian; but there seemed no help for it, and Fanny decided that it would never do to show any signs of fear.

"Come!" said Red Joe, motioning to the little table in the front room. "Good! Heap eat."

It might have been good, but Fanny much feared the victuals were not overly clean. But she did not express her thoughts, and endeavored to make as hearty a meal as possible under the circumstances.

When she had finished, she retired again to the little back room.

She had not relished the glances that Red Joe occasionally gave her, and she wished to keep as far from him as possible.

Several times she wondered if she could steal away, and so lose herself in the hills that they could not find her. A little thought showed the impracticability of the idea. There appeared to be no way of leaving the house without attracting the Indian's attention; and, even if she could do so, and gained the hills, he was doubtless a practical trailer, and would readily overtake her.

The back room had a small window, as has been stated, and this window commanded a view of the plains below where was located the horse-coral that Meek had mentioned. But the window did not offer any avenue of escape, for two heavy bars crossed it. The space remaining was not large enough to permit the passage of a human body.

The horse-coral furnished a point of interest. It contained a large number of young horses; and, to Fanny's surprise, she saw that there were nearly a dozen men gathered in and about it. Conspicuous among them was Melchizedeck Meek, with his long hair and flowing, white beard.

Fanny knew that there were bands of wild horses in the surrounding country, but she had never dreamed that they were so numerous as the number in the coral seemed to testify.

But her head throbbed with a dull, heavy pain, and she could scarcely arouse sufficient energy to wonder at it.

The supposed death of her lover and the hopelessness of her own position, was slowly, but surely crushing her heart and sapping her strength. The fictitious endurance lent by the excitement of the morning was vanishing, and she felt so weak and miserable that she almost wished she might die.

Occasionally Melchizedeck Meek hobbled up to the house, inquired solicitously about her condition, and then hobbled down again. He did not offer to broach the subject of the morning and Fanny was in no mood to push her inquiries. She knew that it would be a useless waste of breath.

The branding and work in the coral went on, the day slowly wore away and night came again, with its blackness and its shadows, so terribly suggestive of the fearful night that had preceded it. And for Fanny Elgin the shadows lay on her heart, as well as on her pillow.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ANGRY QUEEN.

ON the afternoon of the next day a spicy interview took place in the little back room of the Gold Mine.

Nadine, the Card-Queen, descended to the bar-room where Flavel Fox was conferring in low whispers with Nugget Jim, and requested

the privilege of a few minutes' conversation with the former.

Fox was, apparently, eager to comply with the request, and led the way briskly to the dimly-lighted conference room.

Nadine was evidently agitated, so much so that she fairly trembled, as she followed him in. And her voice, from fear or passion, was almost husky.

Fox noticed her condition and vaguely wondered what was coming. Could he have seen the workings of her features beneath the mask he would have been more than alarmed.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked, fearing that a storm was about to break over his devoted head. "You seem weak and ill!"

"What my physical condition may be is of no moment now, Mr. Fox! I come to speak of something of vastly greater importance. It is true that I am not at my best, and for that reason have absented myself from the gaming-tables. And also for another reason that I will make plain later on.

"The question I wish to put to you—and I desire a direct and truthful answer—is: Why did you have Fanny Elgin abducted and carried to that cabin in the mountains?"

Flavel Fox started as if stung by a serpent. Where had Nadine gained her information?

"Why, Nadine, you are certainly laboring under a delusion. Why should I do such a thing?"

"That's what I want to know, Mr. Fox. It is, in fact, the question I asked you."

"It is true that Fanny has mysteriously disappeared, but that she is at a cabin in the Raton Mountains—"

"Is a fact that I well know, Mr. Fox! There is no need of prevarication! I am familiar with the whole story from the moment of her abduction up to the present. She is there, now, in charge of an Indian and a few cowboys. You, yourself, saw her to-day!"

"Why, my dear Nadine, this is preposterous!"

"It is true; and you know it! I saw you there!"

The amazement written on the face of Flavel Fox could scarcely be described.

"Not in your true person, Mr. Fox, but as Melchizedek Meek, the mustang-catcher!"

"Perhaps you are now ready to understand why I seem so weak and nervous this afternoon. To one unaccustomed to horseback exercise, such a ride as I have had is crushing in its exhaustion. You will also understand why I have been away from the gaming-tables. I followed your cowardly band of midnight assassins. The shots and the tumult aroused me and I at once recognized the voice of Fanny Elgin.

"I knew that it was a case of abduction and that you were at the bottom of it. I hastily disguised myself by assuming male attire, got a horse from a livery stable and followed the abductors. I have been out there in the hills ever since watching you!"

She had hurried on with her accusation at such a breathless rate that he had had no chance to interpose a word in explanation or defense.

Now that she paused for a moment, he knew not what to say, for apparently a denial was useless. Finally he resolved to brave it out.

"Nadine, you are certainly a wonderful woman! There is one thing, though, I would like to know: How did you penetrate my disguise? I am sure that during the whole time I was there I never once removed my beard or wig!"

"Then you do not deny my statement?"

"What is the use of denying the assertions of a woman who seems omnipresent? I would deny them, I suppose, if I could; but I can't. To do so would be to call you a liar!"

"Which would not deter you, Flavel Fox, if it served your purpose!"

"Do you want me to tell you what else I know?"

"Yes; go ahead!" with a hard laugh. "I may as well meet my fate like a man! I suppose I have been robbing the United States Treasury?"

"No; but you have been and are robbing your employer! You are the foreman of the 'Double-Bar' horse ranch. The owner does not live in this country and the entire management of the business has devolved on you. The temptation to violate your trust was too great a one for a man of your principles—or rather lack of principles.

"According to your reports to your employer the business has been a losing one almost from the start. During the last few years the losses have been exceptionally heavy. These you have attributed to severe storms and blizzards, which have annually killed off almost all the young

animals—to deaths caused by horses falling over precipices and cliffs in the edge of the mountains, and to losses occasioned by horse-thieves. Every statement of which was absolutely false!"

"I see you are going to hang me!" he exclaimed, with a forced smile.

"Nothing of the sort, Mr. Fox! I simply want to make you comprehend the extent of the power I possess because of this information.

"Those reports to your employer were made to cover up your criminal and dishonest acts.

"In the guise of Melchizedek Meek, an ex-parson and presumably a very pious man, you became an alleged mustang-catcher. The mustangs you caught were the horses and colts which you reported to your employer as stolen and destroyed. You systematically robbed the 'Double-Bar' Ranch of almost its entire increase, every year. These young horses you had branded in the brand of the mythical Meek; and they were sold as his animals and you pocketed the proceeds.

"That is the truth, Flavel Fox, and you know it is!"

"Anything else?" he asked, crossing his legs and coolly stroking his beard. "The catalogue of crimes isn't quite exhausted."

"There are some others, but I will not mention them, now."

"Ah! there are others? I knew there must be!"

"Do you know why I have told you all this?" she asked not heeding his sneering tones.

"Because you love me, I suppose, and want to amuse me with stories!"

"You are nearer the mark, Flavel Fox, than you think! You have professed that you love me! With professions on your lips do you suppose I can tamely submit to see you carry another woman to a secret retreat and visit her day by day, as you will?"

Fox opened his eyes as though light had suddenly come to them. All along he had been wondering how the interview was to terminate.

"If you do, I must say you are not acquainted with the first principles that regulate a woman's heart!"

"Not jealous?" he said, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and smiling.

"There is not a man in the town but has remarked your attentions to me. It has been the gossip of Round-up. And I accepted your addresses as serious. And this is the way you have deceived me. You don't care anything for me, Mr. Fox!"

Woman-like, Nadine was suddenly changing from accusation and anger to pleading and hysteria.

"Tut! tut! Nadine! You are becoming silly. You know I think more of you than any woman in the world. Fanny Elgin was carried away for reasons totally different from those you have conjectured!"

"Silly! I knew that would come next! It's the way with you men. If we show our tempters, no matter what the indignity put on us, we're silly!"

Nadine broke down at this point and actually wept. But it was only for an instant. One, brief, fleeting instant! Then the claws again came out of their velvet sheaths, her eyes flashed fire through the holes in her mask and her voice became terrible in its threatening.

"But remember, Flavel Fox, that it is possible to go too far! And at that point you have arrived. The knowledge of your crimes has not appalled me, for I myself have used questionable means for obtaining money. But this last act is something I cannot and will not submit to!"

Fox recoiled, gasping, before the awful vindictiveness displayed in her tones and manner.

"A veritable she-devil!" he muttered. "She will be the ruin of me yet."

"Fanny Elgin must be released before another sun sets or I will publish to the world everything I know!"

"Why, woman, what do you mean?" he demanded.

"Just what I say, Flavel Fox! I would have you know that I am a woman who cannot be trifled with in any such manner. I do not propose to have a rival. You have chosen to publish to the world that you are devoted to me; and to my mind a rival, held in that surreptitious manner, is worse than if the fact were made public.

"The she-cat!" he gritted under his breath. "If she goes on at this rate I will have to take means to silence her."

"Will you not believe anything I have to say on the subject?" he asked. "I tell you she is not your rival."

"Ah! Mr. Fox! I might believe that if I

hadn't heard of your playful manner toward her in the bar-room just the day before the night in which you spirited her away. That spoke volumes!"

Fox became absolutely purple with fear and rage. What was it that this mysterious woman did not know?

"So I say again: Release her at once, or I will give my knowledge to the people of Round-up; and you know what that means!"

"They wouldn't believe you!" he sneered.

"Wouldn't they? Very well! Fail to comply with my request and we will test the matter."

He saw he must assent.

"Come! come! Nadine! We will not quarrel. I have been rather trying you. If you are determined that I must release that girl, I will do it."

CHAPTER X.

A BOX OF GOLD.

"UFF dot ton'd gid me!"

Happy Hans stared at the soil beneath his feet, as he made the whispered assertion.

He had come shuffling along in the shadows at the rear of the buildings flanking the Gold Mine, having for the time succeeded in evading the notice of Fox's bloodhounds. A hum of voices in the back room of the Gold Mine caused him to lightly vault the fence and approach the curtained windows.

That he was in imminent danger of discovery and perhaps death he fully realized, but he decided that the risk was worth running. He felt certain that Flavel Fox knew nothing of his real character and objects, whatever he might suspect.

Happy Hans had been shadowed so persistently by Fox's spies that he had so far been able to accomplish little. The knowledge made him extraordinarily daring and reckless whenever a favorable opportunity for acquiring important information seemed to present itself.

The proposed eavesdropping might result in nothing, for he had no idea who the speakers were. Then, again, it might reveal knowledge of incalculable value. As events proved, the latter surmise was correct; and he was enabled to listen to the angry accusations of Nadine, and Fox's confessions of their truthfulness.

On gaining the garden Hans had extracted from one of the deep pockets of his ancient coat, a dipping needle such as miners and prospectors use in locating bodies of magnetic ore.

"Dot tream I hat lasd nighd make me vheel awvul foony," he whispered, as he slipped forward, holding the dipping needle in front of him. "I tream dot mine leedle brudder, Fritz, come to my petsite py und whispe indo dot righd ear."

"Id vhas a tream dot I ton'd vhorgid poody quick—vhor he say dot he vhas kilted py a mans vhat shoomp ondo him vhor his bocked-pook! Ach! dot vhas awvul!"

"Bud dot vheller gid vooled like de mans vhat gick de empyd pokes py de vurst uff Abril. Dot bocked-pook vhas got noddings in id!"

"Fritz vhas leedle, but ach, mine cracious, he vhas dot sharb like a putcher-knives! He bat airt so mooch as a pushels uff golt, und dot golt vhas been puried poody glose about dhis place. Uff I vhint dot I vhill sdick a monumnt py his dombstone when I run agross id."

He came close up to the nearest window, and began to scrape about among the leaves that littered the ground, all the time keeping an ear open for what was being said in the room.

The exclamation with which this chapter opened was caused by a rather remarkable discovery. The soil from which he had scraped the leaves showed every indication of having been recently disturbed. In addition, an old spade stood in an angle of the building, and it also exhibited traces of contact with fresh earth. A hurried attempt had evidently been made to remove these traces.

The fact that the old spade stood in that corner would have suggested nothing of itself. But, taken with the discovery of the recent disturbance of the soil, the connection, to the quick mind of Happy Hans was very evident.

Just then Nadine began that series of remarkable accusations linking Flavel Fox with the pretended mustanger, and Hans became so interested in the revelations that he forgot to proceed with his investigations.

After a little, however, he recalled the fact that he was playing a part, and took up the rusty spade. He could proceed with the excavation, and at the same time listen to Nadine's charges. Then, too, the disturbed earth might hold secrets as valuable as any he could gain by eavesdropping.

So he slowly began delving in the soft earth, stopping occasionally when the speakers touched upon some unusually interesting point.

"This little trip, bold and reckless as it certainly is, is already worth all the peril it is likely to cost me!" he muttered, as he rested on the spade and listened to Nadine's tremulous voice. "That information is just what I've been hunting for. I would have risked a visit to a den of lions to have secured it."

"If I am caught here, though, I will either have to fight or play as bold a game of rustic innocence as I ever attempted!"

He again resumed his cautious scraping and delving; then, when he knew the interview was about to terminate, sunk the spade down with all the strength of his heavy foot.

The point of it touched on a hard substance that gave out a metallic sound.

"Struck something!" he observed, proceeding to hastily shovel out the dirt. "From the sound I should judge it to be the iron box that was buried somewhere hereabout by my brother, as revealed in the dream last night."

He smiled, as the concocted story flitted through his mind.

"Whatever it is, I must get it out of there in short order, or I will be apt to have the unkindly assistance of Flavel Fox."

"Of course there's no gold buried here, nor anything else, I suppose, likely to be of benefit to me! But as I am this near to unmasking the mysterious 'What-is-it?' I'll go on to the finish!"

Fox and Nadine had not yet left the room. Their conversation, though, had changed in tone. It had lost its fierce, threatening spirit and was mild and conciliatory. In consequence it made no revelations of interest to Happy Hans; and he became anxious to get through with his self-appointed task and hurry away.

He realized that at any moment Fox might draw one of the window-curtains and look out upon him. The discovery would probably be followed by a shot.

Some of the qualities of the bull-dog were in the composition of this pretended Dutchman. There was a persistence, a savage "grit" and a relentless "do-or-die" about him that strongly suggested the well-known peculiarities of that animal. Peril could not daunt him.

Now that he had fully made up his mind to unearth the metallic object which his spade had clanged against, he would take unnecessary and even foolish risks to accomplish it.

In a little while he had removed the dirt sufficiently to show that the buried object was a square, iron-bound box.

"Fritz's box!" he whispered, a smile spreading over his face. "I will begin to believe, directly, that I really had such a dream and that it's about to come true. Any way it's the most singular coincidence I ever heard of. I came here to hunt for an imaginary box—a box that was wholly a fictitious creation—and on the very ground where I commence my pretended search for it unearth a real one."

He scraped away the dirt from the edges, with his hands, and essayed to draw the box out of the hole. To his surprise he found it so heavy that it resisted all of his strength. However, by making a lever of his spade, he succeeded in setting it upon end.

A suggestive jingle came from the box as he pried and poked at it.

"There is gold in it, I really believe!" he exclaimed, in a tremulous and agitated voice.

Then he began to wish he had waited until night before making the investigation. The danger of discovery was becoming greater every moment, and it really seemed the height of folly to longer delay his departure.

If he had been his usual cool and collected self he would have hastened from the dangerous vicinity instantly. But the excitement of the moment caused him to temporarily lose self-control. A strange thrill shot through him when he heard that suggestive "clink," and his mind whirled with covetous and greedy thoughts.

Once he was on the point of shoveling the dirt back, scattering the leaves again over it and hurrying away.

Two things prevented him from doing this: He doubted if he would have time to thoroughly obliterate the traces of his work; and he feared the box might be removed before he could again visit it.

Standing on end, the box presented a better grasping surface and he again determined to try to remove it from the hole. This time he got down into the pit, clasped the box firmly in his arms and exerted all his strength. The strain was so great that his face grew purple,

his tense muscles knotted like ropes and the swollen veins stood out on his forehead.

But he lifted the box to the surface!

Leaping out beside it, he hastily inserted the edge of the spade under the lid and pried it off.

A dazzling sight greeted him.

The box was filled with gold coin!

At the same instant the harsh voice of Nugget Jim cried, from the rear doorway of the saloon:

"You Dutch scoundrel! What are you doin' there?"

CHAPTER XI.

"DOT VHAS MINE BRUDDER'S BOX!"

To say that Hans was startled, puts it mildly. Before he could reply, Nugget Jim was at his side, looking down into the box with eyes that seemed starting from their sockets. It needed but a glance to show that he had no previous knowledge of its presence there.

When he saw its contents his face became fair fiendish in its murderous greed.

"That's my box!" he exclaimed, his fingers working convulsively. "What are you disturbin' it fer. I buried it there on'y the other day; an' if you don't drop it and make tracks, I'll mash you! What are you doin' hyer, anyway?"

Hans realized that he could not hold the treasure against Nugget's claim, and was seriously thinking of bolting from the premises, when Flavel Fox put in an unwelcome appearance and prevented him. Fox had heard the excited exclamations and hurried out to ascertain their cause.

When he saw the box, and the two men standing over it, he almost exploded with rage. In reality the box, with its contents, was his. It was the treasure safe where he was in the habit of depositing his ill-gotten gains. Only the day before he had effected a sale of horses and the proceeds were in the box.

As he looked at Nugget Jim he suddenly conceived a desire to put a violent end to that gentleman's existence. He suspected, at once, that Nugget had watched him when he last visited the box.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, striding furiously forward, one hand clasping the butt of a revolver.

He was in a towering temper and the bar-keeper shrunk from him as though he expected a blow. As for Hans he would have preferred being anywhere else just then.

"It was the Dutchman!" Nugget explained. "He dug the box up an' was tryin' to git away with it when I come onto him!"

"A likely story!" howled Fox, who was in a thoroughly unreasoning mood.

Then turning to Hans, with the snarl of an angry tiger.

"And what are you doing in here? I suppose you have combined with Nugget Jim to rob me."

"It vhas mine brudder's pox!" protested Hans. "Dot gelt vhas pelong, you pet, do dhis gock-shicken! Dot tream told me do look here; und I vhint dhem py dhis!" producing the dipping needle, as if it were confirmation strong as Holy Writ.

"Bring the box in the house!" commanded Fox. "I will investigate this little affair."

Nugget evidently feared his chief, for he instantly grasped one end of the box and attempted to lift it. Hans came to his assistance and between them the golden treasure was borne into the little room from which Fox had so recently emerged.

Then it suddenly occurred to that astute individual that there might be something back of this affair.

"How long were you out there?" he demanded, suspiciously, of Hans, pointing with extended finger into the garden.

"Yoost a liddle while!" Hans replied promptly enough. "I yoost now dig dhem poxes ub vfrom vhere dhis gompas machine zay id vhas-I vhill tolt you apout dot, eh?"

"And you found it yourself?"

"Vhar zhure!"

"That's what I told you, wasn't it, boss?"

Nugget asked, with an injured air. "I was only speakin' the truth, and you hopped onto me like a toad onto a June bug!"

"And what brought you here?" asked Fox, looking Hans sternly in the face.

"Dhem shoon!" holding up an ungainly foot for inspection.

"This is no laughing affair!" sternly. "In fact it may result in the signing of your death-warrant. Again I want to know what brought you here? Why did you come?"

"Oh! I tolt you dot righd avhay. I vhas peen boonding vhor dot leedle brudder uff mine, vhat roon avhay py his home. I nod vhint him; but he vhint me lasd nighd. He come my petsite py vhen I vhas shleebin' so zount like an invaut, und he vhisber in dot ear."

"Und he tolt me dot he vhas make pusbels uff gelt dhose moundains in; und dot a mans kilted him vhor dot gelt in his pookbocked. But dot mans vhas a Abril vhooshness, vhor dhose moneys vhas puriet dot garten in by a iron pox. Und he show me, doo, how I shoul vhint dhem py dhose gompasess."

"And in obedience to that dream you began a search in this garden?"

"Yaw; so hellup me, dot vhas so!"

Happy Hans's hearers were plainly puzzled.

"Now, look here, Hans! You might as well understand first as last that I don't believe a word of your story. It has an ancient and fishy smell. Your Dutch dialect and pretended verdancy may fool some people, but it don't fool me. I know why you came into that garden! You thought you would hear something not intended for your ear."

Fox made the statement in a very positive tone, determined to drive Hans from behind his mask, if he was using one.

"Uff you know more apout dot as I to myselluf, dhen I oxbet dot maype you shoul delli apout id. Dot vhas de troot!"

"When did you find him there?" Fox inquired, turning to Nugget.

"Jist about a second afore you come onto us!"

"And he had just got the box out of the hole?"

"That's the way it looked to me, boss. Though he might have been playin' double! I can't say!"

"And how did you manage to locate it?" this to Hans. "Was it an accidental stumble?"

"How vhas dot?"

"How did you find the box?"

"Oh, zhure, mit dhose gompasess!" producing the instrument. "Vhen I come py dot blace it shoomp around like a circus agtor."

"Well, now, I want to say to you," looking at both, "that that box of gold is raine. I placed it there, because I was afraid to trust the infernal banks. I came by the money honestly, but the bankers might not have thought so—and, anyway, I didn't care to let them know I had it."

Happy Hans began to flush, as if with indignation.

"Dot gelt you vhas sbeakin' uff, eh? Mine brudder Fritz gid dot dhose moundains vfrom."

"And so you think it ought to be yours? Go tell that to somebody that will believe you. Do you think any one will swallow that ridiculous dream business? You may have had a dream or you may not. I'm certain I don't care one way or another. The gold's mine, and I mean to keep it."

He glared about, as though he contemplated slaying both where they stood.

"Und you mean dot I shall nod hafe dot moneys?" howled Hans, leaping angrily into the air, and then placing himself in a pugilistic attitude.

"That's what I mean!"

He fingered nervously with his revolver, and seemed half-tempted to take a shot at the pugnacious German.

"Now, cool down, for I want to talk soberly to both of you. That gold is mine, and I mean to retain it or die in the attempt. It represents years of struggling on my part!"

"And stealing!" thought Hans.

"But I am disposed to deal fairly with both of you. By some accident you have come into a knowledge of its existence. If you will pledge your words that you will keep that knowledge to yourselves, I will give you each a hundred dollars."

Nugget Jim was watching his master carefully, and he saw in the latter's eyes that which caused him to start and turn deathly pale. He was fully aware of the enormous power that Flavel Fox could wield. No man's life was secure for an instant, if Flavel Fox had determined to sacrifice it.

His master's face was at that moment full of deadly and evil portent. Nugget saw that he was only temporizing to gain time. The bar-keeper and the German knew too much to live long; and Fox had already settled in his mind that they must be slain at the first opportunity. Now, he was talking for the purpose of retaining peaceable possession of the box. Later, he would strike with the rending claws of the mountain lion.

"What do you say to the proposition?" he asked, as no one seemed inclined to speak.

"It suits me!" cried the terrified Nugget.

Anything would have suited him, then. He was only anxious to escape from the room; for he had determined that he would not remain another hour in Round-up.

"And you, Hans?"

"A hoonert tollars outd uff dot bile?"

The German shook his head.

"Nein! Dot vhas mine brudder's money! I gif you so mooch vhor de rend uff dot groundt where I vhint him purriet."

"A hundred or nothing!" declared Fox, rising impatiently. "There it is!"

He counted out the two hundred and tossed them on the floor.

"Take it or leave it. It's immaterial to me. I can't talk here all day. But whether you take it or not remember this: the first one that opens his head on the subject will not long have a head to open. And, as for you, Dutchy, I shall keep a lookout for you! So if you feel or hear something drop, don't be at all surprised."

Nugget Jim had already picked up his share and retreated, glad to escape from the dread presence of his chief.

"There's the door!" cried Fox, sternly. "And thank your good fortune that you get out of here alive. I assure you that you would go out on a board if I didn't know that I could put my hand on you any minute I want to!"

Deeming it foolhardy to remain longer, Hans scooped up the money, muttered some indistinguishable threats, and hastened away.

"About right he was! I ought to be thankful to get out of that place with a whole skin!"

CHAPTER XII.

SOME MESSAGES.

THE brain of the pretended Dutchman was in a whirl, as he walked down the street toward his lodging-house. Matters were shaping toward a crisis, but in a way that greatly mystified him. There were agencies at work that he could not fathom.

Jasper Beeson, the owner of the "Double Bar" horse ranch, had sent him to that remote section of country to investigate and determine the truth or falsity of the reports of his foreman regarding the loss and destruction of stock. The regularity with which these losses were reported had aroused Beeson's suspicions.

The detective had found Fox a much more dangerous man than he had anticipated; and the latter's swarms of spies had kept him from making so rapid an advance as he wished. It had been his intention to haunt the Gold Mine, in the guise of a hilarious and drinking German, and thus keep the horse-ranch foreman under his eye—for he discovered at the very start that Fox was the real owner of that saloon and gambling-den.

The mysterious Nadine puzzled, while she aided him. Who and what was she? And what part was she playing and destined to play in the present drama? He could not answer!

"But there's one thing more!" he mused. "I shall demand her aid before many days pass, for I intend to arrest Flavel Fox boldly in his own saloon, and force her to testify in a court of justice to what she knows. The fact of their intimacy will be a strong factor in support of her testimony. And she shall testify!"

"The first thing to be done, though, is to look up this young woman, Fanny Elgin. It's rather turning aside from my main work, but it will give me an opportunity for inspecting Fox's alleged wild horses, and time spent that way will not be lost."

The detective had determined at once that he would rescue that young lady, and was now satisfying his conscience that he would be justified in temporarily leaving the special work intrusted to him. The sight or knowledge of suffering always appealed to the most generous impulses of his nature, and he would brave any danger to assist an innocent person in distress.

"The trouble, no doubt, will be to find some one who knows the location of the place, for I'll warrant that Flavel Fox hasn't posted the information on a bulletin board. The men in his employ know where it is, of course; but I dare not approach them with any inquiries, for it would certainly arouse suspicion."

"Fox agreed to release the young lady, if I understood him aright, but you can't rely on the promises of such a man. He has some unknown reason for holding her. He gains some advantage by it, and that will cause him to cling to her all the tighter."

Happy Hans had heard something about the attack on Basil King; but the news was filtered to him in so fragmentary a way that he really

gained no knowledge. Rumor did not connect the disappearance of Fanny Elgin with this attack; and the motive was thought to be robbery. How badly the young man was injured, the detective had not heard, nor what became of him after the fight. Such midnight attacks were too common to long engross the attention of the people of Round-up.

Then the detective's mind returned to the singular discovery of the box of gold and the incidents directly connected therewith. He was satisfied the box contained the money obtained by the sale of Beeson's horses, and he determined that when once he had Fox in his grasp, he would make him yield it up.

The day passed uneventfully enough, though Hans was all the while busy. Several attempts at obtaining information of the location of Meek's cabin were failures, and Hans feared to question the men known to be in Fox's employ.

Night would give him better opportunities for acquiring knowledge, he thought; and as soon as darkness fell he started out with the rather vague hope of stumbling upon some information.

He saw one of Fox's spies at the corner of the street, and halted for a moment, wondering how he might throw the fellow off the track.

Just then a man brushed hurriedly by. In his haste he stumbled against Hans so violently that both were almost precipitated to the ground. The stranger gathered himself up, muttered an apology and dashed on—leaving a roll of paper in the detective's hands.

There were a number of bystanders who had seen the awkward collision; and to keep them from noticing the roll of paper Hans quickly thrust it into one of his pockets. After a little, he returned to his room.

Lighting the little coal-oil lamp with which the room was provided, he spread the papers out on the rough table.

There were two of them, and they were letters. The first and longest read as follows:

"HANS SWENTZEL:—

"DEAR SIR:—This will be placed in your hands this evening by special messenger from me, who will take means of giving it to you without, at the same time, conveying warning to our enemies.

"In spite of your disguise and your denials when I called to see you, I know who and what you are. You *did* temporarily throw me off the track, but later events have convinced me that my first conjecture was right: that you are a detective and in pursuit of Flavel Fox. I wish to assure you that, although I am no detective, our objects are identical.

"As you are aware Fox is foreman of the 'Double Bar' horse ranch and owner of the Gold Mine. He is also a pretended mustanger, sailing under the name of Melchizedek Meek.

"My object in writing to you, at this time, is to urge you to attempt the rescue of Miss Fanny Elgin, who is now held at the cabin of the supposed Meek in the Raton Mountains. It ought not to be a difficult feat, for my spies have discovered that she is rather carelessly guarded at times. I would have them attempt it, only for reasons which I will make known to you later.

"As for myself, my condition is such that I could not make the journey out there, nor do any effective work when I got there. At the time of Miss Elgin's abduction I was struck a heavy blow on the head with the butt of a revolver; and I am still so weak from the effect of it that it would be impossible for me to travel that distance. The blow was truly a severe one, but I feel certain it saved my life. It knocked me senseless. In my fall I rolled into the dense shadows of the buildings. The abductors doubtless thought me dead; and the men who came out of the gaming-room failed to see me.

"I recovered consciousness after a little, but was so prostrated and weak that it was hours before I could drag myself to a place of safety.

"Meek's cabin is about ten miles distant, just within the edge of the mountains, and near to where a gorge puts out into the plains. It is in a due northwest line from Round-up. The accompanying map will explain its location more fully and aid you in finding it.

"I am satisfied, Mr. Swentzel, that when you fully understand the case, as I have outlined it, you will not hesitate in attempting the rescue of this young lady from the hands of as villainous a set of devils as ever lived.

"On your return I have no doubt but that I can be of signal service to you; and I assure you, you can command me to the extent of my information and ability and to the last dollar I possess.

"Believe me, yours most sincerely,
"BASIL KING."

The other letter was to Fanny Elgin, and was filled with the warmest expressions of love and devotion. The detective felt rather guilty in reading it, but the tone of the one to himself he thought, gave him that liberty—and besides it was in the line of his business.

Basil King assured his sweetheart that his injuries were only slight; introduced Happy Hans as "the detective I told you about, and who, I haven't the slightest doubt, will succeed in re-

leasing you;" and asked her to trust in the latter fully.

The detective was cautious by nature; and after folding up the letters and placing them carefully in an inner pocket, sat for a long time pondering the subject.

It occurred to him that, notwithstanding their apparent sincerity, they might be decoys sent for the purpose of leading him into some trap.

He determined at last, however, that, trap or no trap, he would make the venture. He had already decided upon that before receiving them, and would simply be carrying out his original intentions. Their directions as to how to find Meek's cabin might be misleading, but he had no way of determining that except by a practical test.

If he had known where Basil King then was, he would have visited him and judged of his sincerity by a personal interview. Such an interview would also decide whether or not the letters were genuine.

He wondered how Basil gained so much important information. Spies were spoken of; but they must be extremely shrewd to extract information that the detective only stumbled on by chance. And other information, like the location of the cabin, which he had not possessed at all.

Knowing that the spy would still be on the street corner, he made some slight changes of raiment for purposes of disguise and again left the house.

By slouching the soft hat he now wore, down over his eyes, he passed the spy without detection and hurried to a livery stable in a distant part of the town. There he secured two horses.

A little later he was out in the country; and, guided by the stars, was speeding away toward the lonely cabin in the mountains.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HORSE-THIEVES' LEAGUE.

FOR a long while after the departure of Happy Hans, Flavel Fox sat staring at the box of yellow coin and wondering what he had better do with it. There were other thoughts, too, that troubled him greatly. In fact, the flowery path he had lately fancied he was traveling, was becoming very thorny and tortuous. He was learning the lesson that all men are forced to learn sooner or later; for it is as true, now, as it was in the days of old, that "the way of the transgressor is hard!"

However, like most men who have become confirmed criminals, the thickening about him of known and unknown dangers did not in the least deter him from a continuance of evil. He was not thinking of repentance, but of a way to escape the just punishment that seemed menacing him.

He scarcely knew who to trust. Nugget Jim was in possession of a secret that would tend to make of him a dangerous man—and Nugget had always been one of the most faithful of his adherents! But Nugget had an itching palm and Fox knew the scoundrel would not hesitate to betray or even kill him for less than half the sum represented in that box.

Then there was Happy Hans! Whether the fellow was what he pretended to be or not Fox confessed he could not tell. Anyway, he, too, was in possession of the perilous secret.

And Nadine! The mysterious, witching and queenly Nadine! She had risen before him as an accusing and threatening angel! How had she obtained the information she had hurled at him with such fine scorn? He had, in moments of weakness, told her much, but not all! How he cursed himself, now, for yielding to the flattery of her smiles and intrusting to her keeping so many confidences. And, besides, who and what was she? He could not answer; and the cold sweat started from every pore as the uncomfortable suggestion came to him that she might be a spy in the pay of his enemies.

As he thought of these things, he writhed like a spider that is becoming enmeshed in its own web.

A dark look came over his face, and he decided that if assassination and murder were required to remove such stumbling-blocks as arose, he would not hesitate to make use of those desperate agencies.

Then he got up, stuffed wads of paper around the loosened coin to keep it from rattling and moving in the box, and secured the lid.

When this was done he called a laborer from the street and had him assist in conveying the box to an unused lumber room, in the building.

"It will have to stay there until to-night!" he said, after he had paid the laborer and the lat-

ter had departed. "Then I will hunt up some place where I can bury it again. I wonder if that Dutchman's dipping-needle really did point out its location? It seems possible, but hardly probable. And, yet, I can't understand, on any other supposition, how he chanced to find it!"

Although Flavel Fox had assured Nadine that he would release Fanny Elgin, he had no intention, whatever, of fulfilling the promise. Fanny knew too much, he felt assured, to warrant him in speedily restoring her to liberty. A little later, when his plans were more fully matured, he would do so; but not now. He must look out first for his own safety; for, should the coils continue to tighten, he intended to soon shake the dust of Round-up from his feet.

Fanny doubtless knew, now, all that Basil King had known; and that was not inconsiderable, as Nugget Jim had testified.

And that brought back to Fox the remembrance that even the fate of Basil King was uncertain. The intended assassins had stated that they left him dead by the gate; but his body was not subsequently discovered. Fox feared that the sudden rush of men from the gaming-room had prevented thorough work, and that Basil had succeeded in crawling away and was still alive.

After satisfying himself that the box of gold was not liable to discovery in its place of temporary concealment, Fox descended to the street and hurried away to another part of the town.

Turning up a dark and dirty alley, he approached a tumble-down shanty and rapped on the door.

"Come in!" called a gruff voice; and in response to the invitation Fox lifted the latch and entered the room.

A shaggy-bearded, red-eyed man sat on the edge of a bed, his shoeless feet resting on a chair.

"Why, hello, boss! It's you, is it? Take a cheer."

He removed his feet as he said this, and shoved the chair toward his visitor.

"Yes, it's me!" said Fox, taking the proffered seat. "How are you getting along? You look like you'd been 'steaming it' pretty heavy lately."

This man who addressed Fox as boss was a thoroughly unprincipled rascal, as one look at his evil face would disclose. He was a fairly good cowboy when out on the range and away from evil influences; but when in the town—and he was in the town half of his time—he was a drunken, disreputable sot.

Nevertheless Fox had given him the chief position at the horse-ranch, for the simple reason that Sandy Jim was a man he could use.

During the greater part of the year, Fox only employed two men on the ranch in addition to Sandy Jim, and they were fully as conscienceless and disreputable.

At the round-ups, when more men were required, Sandy Jim selected such as could be trusted to do villainous work; and, so far, Fox had found no difficulty in playing the role that had so successfully lined his pockets.

Sandy Jim was also what Fox termed his "chief of the horse-thieves."

It was necessary to have an occasional raid of these gentry, to bear out the statements made to his employer; and Sandy Jim really seemed to delight in these wild and reckless escapades. As everything was planned beforehand, no one was injured and the half-drunken night-riders had an abundance of fun and pistol-practice.

"Hain't drunk nuthin' sence yisterday!" Jim asserted, in answer to the question. "My mouth feels like a cotton-ball. Now, ef you've got a thimbleful handy?"

"Which I haven't!" Fox interrupted. "No, Jim, I've got a little work for you which will require a clear head. After it's over you can burst yourself with red liquor, if you want to. My advice, though, is to let the stuff alone on all occasions!"

"Which, I'm kalkilatin', ef't was follered, would knock the bizness o' the Gold Mine higher'n a kite!"

"Yes, it would!" Fox admitted. "But I didn't come to preach a sermon nor to hear one. I've got a little business on hand that needs attention to-night, and you're the man to look after it."

"More boss bizness?"

"Not this trip, Jim! But it's a little in that line. In fact, I want a girl run off, instead of horses."

Sandy Jim straightened himself up a little and stared at his employer in a dull, mystified way.

"Stick to hosses, boss! that's my advice."

Gals is onreasonable, kickin' critters. They ain't no dependin' on 'um."

"Speaking from the book, are you? I didn't know, Jim, that you'd ever had much experience in that line."

Fox laughed at his companion's lugubrious expression.

"That's my say, boss, an' you've heerd it. Stick to hosses!"

"Your advice is first-class, Jim. For once, though, I'll have to disregard it. A day or two ago it might have saved me trouble. But I'm into it, now, and you must help me out."

"There's a girl at Meek's cabin! I had her carried there because I thought she would prove dangerous to me in the town. The truth is, Jim, she knows too much, and I had to place her somewhere to keep her from talking."

"I have just learned that some of her friends have got an idea where she is, and will probably attempt to get her away from there. They don't know, though, that I'm mixed up in the affair and I don't want them to, for it mightn't be healthy. And it will never do to have the girl's long tongue back here in Round-up."

"Now, what I want you to do is to make a descent on Meek's cabin to-night and carry the girl away. Get together the members of your famous 'Horse-thieves' League,' you know, and you'll not be apt to have any trouble. I'll fix it so that no one will be there but the Indian."

"Take the girl back into the mountains, somewhere, to some deserted hunter's cabin, and keep her there until you hear from me."

"Druther play boss-thief, boss, but I'll do it, ef't's orders!" said Sandy Jim, with an air that showed he did not much relish the job. "How long air we likely to hev to stay out there in the hills? It's a lonesome place, an' the lickker stores air too fur away to suit me!"

"Not over a day or two!" replied Fox. "I'll arrange to release you in that time. I'll depend on you, now, shall I? Remember, it's to-night! Short notice, but the pay will be extra good!"

"Figger that it's done!" said Sandy Jim, laconically. "Twill be, afore mornin'!"

Flavel Fox signified his pleasure and at once left the house.

"Hang it all!" mused Sandy Jim. "I don't want to leave at all to-night. But I'll hev to. Orders is orders, and the boss pays well. Seems to me, though, that he's a-stackin' so many cards up his sleeves he'll be apt to drop some o' 'em bymeby, ef he ain't keerful. Then there'll be several of us 'll hev to git frum under!"

He got up from the bed and arranged his toilet by clawing the disheveled hair out of his eyes. Then he clapped a greasy cowboy hat on his head and sallied forth into the streets.

His errand kept him busy until sundown.

Then he returned to the dirty shanty, drank an immoderate quantity of strong coffee to drive the remaining liquor-fumes out of his brain, and again stretched himself on the bed.

He was soon snoring loudly, and did not awaken from his heavy sleep until some time after midnight.

Then he made and drank some more strong coffee, ate a little and again left the cabin.

By this time he was rapidly recovering from his debauch and getting in fair condition for the work in hand.

The streets were nearly deserted, as he strode along them in the direction of the suburbs. The saloons and gambling dens, however, were in full blast; and it took a strong exercise of his will to keep from entering some of them when the heavy scent of the villainous drinks came to his nostrils.

But Sandy Jim always endeavored to keep himself well in hand when he had an important bit of work to do; and he pushed on grimly until he had passed the last of them.

Finally he emerged upon the plain, where several men were in waiting, with horses. They were the members of his "Horse-thieves' League" and as villainous a set as ever mustered under the folds of the black banner.

A few hasty words were exchanged. Jim climbed into his saddle, and the journey to the cabin of Melchizedeck Meek was commanded.

They did not reach it until nearly daylight. Then they were treated to a startling surprise.

Fanny Elgin was nowhere to be found; and her Indian guard, Red Joe, was lying on the earthen floor in so drunken and deep a stupor that it was utterly impossible to arouse him.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ATTEMPTED ESCAPE.

To return to Fanny Elgin, whom we left prostrated and almost heart-broken at the lonely cabin in the edge of the mountains.

The second morning of her imprisonment she found Melchizedeck Meek gone. He had evidently departed during the night; for she had, before falling asleep, heard him talking in low tones to Red Joe.

In his place, however, were three cowboys—so that her guards were really doubled.

During this second day she was permitted some liberties, and was even allowed to walk backward and forward for quite a distance along the mountain-side.

When she first learned that she would be given this liberty, a wild hope that she might find some means of escape came to her. But this was speedily dissipated. Go where she would, she found that she could scarcely get beyond the eagle-like glance of Red Joe.

All day long the cowboys sat in the little front room, manipulating a greasy pack of playing-cards. Toward evening they mounted their horses and rode away.

Then it was that Fauny began to fully realize the terror and lonesomeness of her position. The cowboys were evidently a bad lot; but they were, at least, white men, and their presence, she felt, interposed between her and Red Joe.

She feared the Indian. Perhaps it was a causeless fear, but it was none the less terrible and real for that. Red Joe was a vindictive, sensual-looking brute, with scarcely a redeeming trait revealed on his coppery visage; and Fanny Elgin had always experienced a thrill of horror at the very sight of an Indian.

He seemed inclined to treat her very respectfully and civilly, however; and, when supper was prepared, invited her out to it in his usual fashion.

"I am not hungry, this evening, Joel!" she said, dissembling her fears and smiling at him. "I have something of a headache and would rather sit here at the window and look out on the mountains."

Red Joe gave a grunt of assent, and proceeded to devour the supper himself. He was a philosopher, probably and reasoned that if she did not choose to partake of supper, there would be that much more for him to dispose of.

Fanny decided to cling to the back room until the arrival of some more white men. If Joe showed an inclination to disturb her she could barricade the partition door and probably hold him at bay. In rummaging about the room she had found a rusty pocket-knife and this served to nerve and give her assurance. The knife was a big, heavy affair, such as cowboys commonly carry, and fitted to clean a horse's hoofs or carve a grizzly. But it was so rusty and clogged with dirt that it was only after much effort and labor that she had succeeded in opening one blade.

That blade she decided should not be closed again while she retained the knife in her possession, and all through the afternoon, whenever Red Joe's eye was not on her, she had rubbed, polished and ground that blade against the bowlders of the hillside.

With her hand against this knife, in the pocket of her dress, she sat by the barred window and looked out toward the plains and the now deserted horse-corral.

The picture presented by the open plains and the somber, flanking mountains was a lovely one if her mind had but been in a receptive mood. Like a great, fery eye, the sun sunk between the jagged western cliffs; the clouds took on the tints of the rainbow and the peaks became pinnacles of fire. The arching sky bent like a bow of sapphire, and down its western end slipped the new moon, a silvery boat dropping into a burning sea.

But Fanny saw neither the beauties of earth nor sky. Her mind was busy with the town of Round-up and its people. Her heart was too heavy to turn itself away from its own miseries.

When night came Red Joe did not at once light the lamp in the front room, but sat moodily smoking in the darkness. What thoughts were stirring in his mind, who can tell? Perhaps he was thinking of the departed glory of his people: more likely he was wondering where he would get another dipperful of fire-water.

The hours slipped by as he sat there and smoked. Finally he arose, lighted the lamp, and went out into the darkness.

For a time Fanny could hear him walking softly about in front of the building. Then his shuffling footsteps ceased altogether. She wondered if he had lain down in front of the door, and gone to sleep, or had wandered out along the trail.

Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes passed by, and Red Joe did not return.

Fanny wondered if it would be possible for her to slip out into the darkness and conceal

herself in the hills so that Red Joe could not find her. She had a pretty fair idea of the direction in which Round-up lay, and of the distance, and she believed if she could but evade Red Joe and get out of the cabin, she could be so far from the place by morning that he could not retake her.

Filled with this thought, she grasped the rusty knife firmly and crept to the front door. Standing back of it, or rather to one side, she peered out and listened long and earnestly.

As objects became more distinct, she fancied she saw a man crouching in the path only a few feet away. It was only a boulder; but it gave her such a chill of horror, that she incontinently retreated, shivering, to her own room.

The thought had come to her that Red Joe's silence might be merely a ruse to decoy her from the house; and for a half-hour she sat on the little cot, quaking and trembling with ill-defined fear.

Then her courage again asserted itself, and she crept once more to the outer door. The opportunity of escape seemed really too good to be lost.

Again that boulder frightened her, but she had nerved herself to expect it, and the shock was only temporary. Strange she had never noticed the peculiar stooping position of that boulder before. It seemed so like a man, that for an instant her heart stood in her mouth.

But Red Joe was nowhere to be seen.

The sighing of the breeze gave her another fright. It sounded like the Indian's peculiar breathing when asleep. For the time being, in fact, every shape and sound of nature brought with it thrilling suggestions of Red Joe.

For several minutes she stood there trembling and hesitating. Finally she stepped out timidly, but drew back again and peered for the hundredth time into the surrounding darkness.

At last she took the plunge, like a bold swimmer leaping into icy depths. She stepped away softly and carefully at first; then, finding herself several yards from the cabin, broke into a hasty run.

Instantly heavy steps were heard behind her.

Red Joe had been sitting at one side of the cabin on a flat stone smoking and dozing by turns. The sound of her footsteps aroused him instantly to a comprehension of the state of affairs, and he began an immediate pursuit.

Fanny shrieked with terror as she heard that heavy tread, and flew heedlessly down the rocky slope like a frightened fawn. But her speed was not equal to the Indian's, and she soon found herself clasped to his brawny breast.

"Me kill!" he cried, dragging her roughly backward.

A gleaming knife flashed in his right hand, and poor Fanny gave herself up for lost.

"Come! Tepee!" he exclaimed, almost dragging her from her feet. "No run away ag'in!" and he waved the knife threateningly.

Fanny was so weak and terrified she could scarcely stand; but she turned about obediently and began to clamber up the rugged trail.

"He will kill me perhaps when we reach the cabin!" was her mental comment; and she began to nerve herself for a terrible struggle.

CHAPTER XV.

RED JOE'S VISITOR.

HAPPY HANS found it rather rough traveling when he reached the boulder-strewn mountain slopes. He had studied the map furnished by Basil King, but the darkness concealed the prominent landmarks, and it was not long until he found himself quite at sea.

The chances are that he would have missed the cabin of Melchizedek Meek had not Red Joe, at about that time, lighted the lamp.

As its red rays gleamed across the intervening distance like some fiery star, Happy Hans took new courage and pushed onward.

After a time, as the route got rougher, he dismounted and tied his horses to a convenient bush, and then picked his way along on foot.

He was not far from the cabin when Fanny made her bold dash for liberty.

The sudden pattering of her feet down the mountain-side startled him somewhat. Then came those wild screams.

He hurried on as rapidly as possible, scarcely knowing what to expect. When close enough to see through the open door into the lighted room, he began to comprehend the cause of the alarming sounds.

Red Joe had driven the girl back into the cabin, and was now making use of some very expressive pantomime to warn her that she must not again attempt flight. The pantomime was accompanied by words, but the detective was not near enough to understand them.

His first impulse was to rush forward, strike down Red Joe and fly with the girl. Cooler thought, however, convinced him that he could scarcely approach without attracting the Indian's attention. The result would be a struggle, in which one or both might be slain. He had no wish to take the Indian's life, and he certainly had no desire to unnecessarily expose his own. Fanny was in no immediate danger, he judged, and could safely await liberation by slower and less perilous methods.

As he stood there, thinking the matter over, a plan of action suggested itself.

In accordance with this plan, he hiccoughed loudly, and stumbled rather heedlessly toward the house.

Red Joe at once heard the sounds, and came to the door to investigate their cause and nature.

To his surprise he saw, as he thought, a half-intoxicated man staggering up the slope—for Happy Hans had placed himself in the broad fan of light issuing from the doorway.

Red Joe was not at all pleased with the vision, and grasped his knife sullenly.

The detective noticed the movement, but did not hesitate or halt in his advance. His revolver was handy and he had determined that he would use it on the Indian, if the latter proved too ugly.

"Hello! Hello!" he cried, as he came within hailing distance—blinking rapidly and shading his eyes from the light. "Who lifes dot haus in, a'ready? Py sheminy I vhas losted mine-sulluf I to relief. Vhas dhis peen dot drail vhor Rount-ub?"

"Trail go odder way!" exclaimed Red Joe, in evident disgust.

As for Fanny, at the first sound of that heavy German voice, she had sunk into a chair, pale and trembling. It caused strange hopes to flutter in her breast. Basil had told her of the jolly, Dutch detective, and she wondered if this could be the man, and if he was coming to rescue her!

"I'd vhas ge tifferend vhorom dhis vhay, eh? Vhell, dot gids me, vhor zhure! I vhas peen twisted rount like a zyglone."

"Say, you vhellers! Looker here, now! Coult I sday mit you do-nighd? My feed gif outd more as dwo hour ago, und my he't id go sbinnin' like a whirligigs."

As he said this he stumbled heavily forward, caught and steadied himself by the side of the door and stared up into the Indian's face with drunken and owlish gravity.

"Trail go odder way!" urged Red Joe. "Me keepe no hotel. Out there ver' good bed!" pointing to the rocks.

"Bud I say, misder—Misder Inchuns, now you looker here avhiles! Dhis vhas nod a hodel estaplishment's! I know dot! Neim! Neidher vhas id a lifery sdaple! Bud—"

He lifted one finger solemnly and stopped, as if forgetting what he intended to say. Then he started again, with a lurch:

"Say, you vhellers! I subbose dot I mighd some subber gid, eenyhow! I vhas dot hoongry like doo dvin vhales, I could ead a mans!"

He fumbled in his pockets, drew out a varied assortment of odds and ends, then dived deeper and fished up a bottle of brandy.

At sight of it Red Joe's eyes watered and his mouth expanded in a broad grin.

"Give!" he exclaimed, reaching out a covetous and greasy hand.

"Nod yid, you pet mel!" cried the detective, tipping the bottle to his lips and pretending to swallow a quantity of the liquor.

"Ach! Dot vhas goot!" wiping his mouth with his coat-sleeve and then corking the bottle tightly. "Dot vhas de chenuine ardicle! I vhas garry dot along vhor raddlesnakes."

He was about to return it to his pocket, when Red Joe again extended his hand, exclaiming:

"Give Injun fire-water!"

"Vhell, now, Misder Inchuns, I ton'd know so mooch apout dot. Uff I sleeb outd id vhill take zix dimes dot do keeb de vherezin' avhay vhorom me."

"Give Injun fire-water!" again cried Red Joe, half appealingly and half in anger.

"Which vhay vhas dot Rount-ub drail, eh?"

Happy Hans staggered away from the door and seemed in the notion of departing.

Then he evidently changed his mind, for he turned again and came close up to Red Joe.

"Uff I bay vhor id I subbose I coult sday py you, eh? My he't vhas go sbin rount like a dop vhat vhas garry."

"Yes!" said Red Joe, forgetting his charge in his eager desire for the much-loved fire-water.

"Give Injun drink! White man stay."

"Whoobeel! You pet!"

"Und ve von'd go home dill morning, Dill those preak uff tay come 'lonk."

"Say, Misder Inchun! Ve vhaikes ub those moundains mit dem songs, eh?"

Red Joe drew back from the doorway and Happy Hans half-rolled and half-stumbled into the room.

"Fire-water!" said the Indian, once more extending his hand.

"Dhose vbas de chenuine ardicle!" cried the pretended drunken man, balancing himself with difficulty in a chair and bringing the bottle down on the table with a crash. "I dbrinks dot sdvif in de olt gountry."

Red Joe did not wait for eulogies or explanations. He seized the bottle by the neck, lifted it on high and began to pour the fiery fluid down his throat.

"Sdop! Sdop!" cried Hans. "Id must pe dot you neffer see any vbhiskys pefore. Dot vhas nod a chug so you could dbrink like a zucker-visb. I vands some uff dhose liguors mineselluf. Here! Here! Holt up dhere, you!"

He pulled at the Indian's ragged coat with such energy that the latter replaced the bottle on the table. But it was with a sullen shrug, as if he was half inclined not to.

"You dbrinks you, py sheminy, dhose vhas a vbhisky parrels dot you hafe some condtracts vhor emplying? Dake him slower und he lasd longer!"

Fanny Elgin was staring at this singular performance, half in wonder and half in disgust. The actions of the German seemed altogether too real to be assumed; and she began to think that instead of a deliverer, he was only to prove a drunken wretch, almost as brutal and degraded as her Indian guard.

Happy Hans had never looked at her or given any indication that he was aware of her presence.

The Indian was about to catch up the bottle again, when the Dutchman headed him off by grasping it first.

"No, mine goot frient! You yoost vaid a leedle. I vband vun swallow off dot snake-pite mineselluf."

He placed it to his lips and held it there so long that Fanny was almost convinced that he was really what he seemed. But when he lowered the bottle she again took courage. She noticed a very significant thing, which Red Joe did not: Notwithstanding the length of time the bottle had been poised in air, the quantity of liquor in it did not seem to be appreciably diminished.

"Dhere! Ach, dot vhas gid petter und petter! Dhry him again. Dhose vhas de vinesd uff moundain tews!"

Red Joe needed no second invitation; and the look of supreme bliss that came to his coppery face as the potent liquor glided down his throat, attested more than could words to his great love for the white man's fire-water.

"Ugh!" he cried, setting down the bottle, when he could really swallow no more without strangling. "Heap good! Muchee extry!" and he rubbed and patted his stomach in a ridiculously laughable way.

"You pet me dot vhas de troot!" asserted Happy Hans, clutching at the table to keep his chair from going over backward. "Dot vhas vbine! I say, you vhellers! Ve make a nighd uff id, eh? Yaw; dot vhas right!"

"Ve von'd go home dill—"

"Dake another dbrinks! Dhere is a blendy more where dot came vhorom!"

He shoved the bottle toward Red Joe, and the latter could not resist the temptation to again sample it. He was already beginning to show the effects of his potations, and Hans felt sure that a few more swallows would lay him out.

This time Red Joe clung tenaciously to the bottle, and took one drink after another until the liquor disappeared. When that was accomplished, he was so thoroughly intoxicated that he could not rise from his seat. For a time he glared wildly and idiotically about, muttering incoherently, then his head sunk forward on the table and he went fast asleep.

As soon as this occurred, the detective turned to Fanny Elgin, all traces of intoxication at once disappearing:

"It seems a pity, Miss Elgin, to take advantage of any one in that way, does it not? But I believe the end justifies the means. If men, white and red, will give themselves up to so slavish and debasing a habit, they must expect to suffer, to be taken advantage of, and to have their plans and purposes brought to naught."

"In this case it was that or a fight, with the chance that one of us would be killed."

He extended, as he said this, the note that had been given into his hands by Basil King's messenger, and intended for Fanny.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DEADLY TRAP.

THE contents of the letter, assuring her that Basil was alive and only slightly injured, together with the happy turn affairs had taken, made Fanny almost delirious with joy.

"Oh, Mr. Swentzel, I'm sure I can never repay you for the trouble and risks you have undergone."

A suspicious moisture came into the detective's smiling eyes.

"There is no need to attempt a repayment, Miss Elgin. This little affair was rather in the line of my duty, and even if it were otherwise, I should be only too happy to render you assistance. I can see that you have suffered greatly during the short term of your imprisonment."

"Let us talk, rather, of getting away from here. It is quite possible that Meek or some of his men may put in an appearance."

Fanny then spoke of the cowboys who had been there that day, and the knowledge made the detective anxious to leave the house.

"They may come back at any time," he said. "Likely they went off for an evening's frolic, and will return before morning."

"I have two horses hitched a half-mile or so from here, and if you are ready, we will quit this place at once."

"As for that fellow," looking at the thoroughly-soaked Indian, "he will be powerless for harm for a good many hours to come, and we can safely leave him where he is."

While Fanny was nervously and excitedly flitting about the room, getting ready for departure, he told her how he had received the letters from Basil King, and also revealed to her the fact that Flavel Fox and Melchizedek Meek were one.

The revelation greatly astonished her. She had felt sure from the start that Meek was not what he pretended to be, but had never even dreamed that he was Flavel Fox in disguise.

In a little while she announced her readiness, and they left the cabin together, after extinguishing the lamp and closing the door.

"He might get up and stumble about the place, and succeed in roasting himself," said the detective, nodding toward Red Joe as he turned out the light.

They hurried rapidly down the trail and soon came to the tethered horses, which they mounted. Then, deviating somewhat to avoid unpleasant encounters with chance travelers, they hastened toward Round-up.

It was a long and tiresome ride, but they succeeded in reaching the town without accident or incident, and shortly after midnight.

Happy Hans had been giving much troubled thought to the question of where he might place Fanny to secure her safety, when she relieved his mind by telling of a lady friend with whom she felt sure she could remain for a few days.

They left their horses in the suburbs and stole quietly through byways and narrow alleys until the residence of the lady was reached.

It was a late hour to apply for admittance; but, when the kind-hearted woman was aroused and understood the necessities of the case, she gave the girl a warm welcome.

"Now, that that bit of work has been safely and satisfactorily performed, I must return to the main trail—the end of which, if I am not much mistaken, lies in the Gold Mine Saloon."

After returning the horses to the livery stable, he started on foot for his lodgings.

The street in front of the place was deserted—it was never a lively quarter—and the spy was gone.

"Perhaps he found out he was watching an empty rat-hole!" mused the detective. "It's an aggravating discovery to make, as I know from experience."

"Some'un in hyer to-night lookin' fer ye!" said the surly proprietor, as the detective went into the little office before proceeding to his room.

"So! Sorry I nod haf' de bleasure uff meed-ing him!" replied Hans, coolly lighting and puffing away at a short, black pipe.

There was a look on the face of the proprietor that he did not like.

"What sort uff a mans might dhose vellers be now? Maybe id vhas mine leedle brudder, Fritz, vhat I hafe been boonding vhor dhis gountry ofer! Dot Fritz vhas a shly weasels, und id vout pe yoost like him do vhint me und sboil dot bleasure I oxbect vfrom vhinting him."

"No; 'twasn't a Dutchman! It was a little,

black-eyed chap, as looked like he'd come a-gunnin' fer ye."

"So!" opening his blue eyes widely and tugging furiously at the pipe. "Somebody vwant do shood me, eh, like I vhas been a brairie-shicken? Dot vhas sinkular, eenyhow! Vhat vhas de madder mit dhose vellers?"

The information did not seem to alarm him; but he tucked his hands under the long trails of his coat and walked thoughtfully about the room.

"I told him you wasn't in," continued the proprietor, without answering the last question, "so he 'lowed he'd wait fer ye an' see you in the mornin'."

Hans stopped abruptly and came back toward the speaker.

"Und dhot v heller vhas here now, waiding vhor me?"

"He's in his room, I calc'late. I give him the key, an' I reckon he went there."

"Und det room vhas—"

"Jist under youn! It was the only extry room I had. And then I thought likely it'd be best not to put you both on the same floor, seein' he looked like he was gunnin' fer ye."

"Vhell, now, uff dot vhlloor vhas sheed iron, id vout make me vheel petter! Maype he vhill make out uff dot a zeive when I go ub dhere!"

The fellow laughed, in a suggestive, gurgling way, that convinced the detective he was not telling all he knew.

If the proprietor's statements were true, the man who had been looking for Hans was an emissary of Flavel Fox. It was possible that Fox had secured some ruffian who was bold and reckless enough to pick a quarrel with the detective, and attempt to slay him. If that was the case, Hans could look for an encounter with the fellow in the morning.

It was far more likely, however, he argued, that some underhanded work would be attempted. The fact that the man had the room directly beneath his seemed to bear out this latter supposition.

What the trick would be the detective had no idea. But it occurred to him that whatever it was the proprietor knew all about it. The information he had given, which was no doubt largely misleading, would tend to show his good will toward the hunted man, and prove that he was an entirely innocent party, should bloodshed result.

Evidently the proprietor was as shrewd as he was unscrupulous. In league with Fox against the detective, he yet aimed to so cover his tracks that no damaging testimony could be brought against him.

Happy Hans puffed away, grimly and stolidly, at his short, black pipe, as these reflections flitted through his mind. No one would have supposed for an instant that he realized or dreamed of the probable dangers that lay in wait for him.

"Vhell, I dhinks me petter I go to ped, uff I oxbect do gid ub to-morrow. Dot vellers, uff he vhands do shood me, vhill hafe do vait, py sheminy, dill I gids me my shleeb out!"

He knocked the ashes from the pipe, tucked it carefully away in one of his pockets, and proceeded to climb the dark and narrow stairway.

He hesitated in front of the door for some time, almost fearing to open it. The rascal might be concealed in the apartment, and would doubtless try a shot at him when the door swung back.

Finally he pushed the door open cautiously, and stepped into the room.

As he did so, the floor gave way beneath him, and he shot downward. With a startled cry he threw out his hands in an instinctive endeavor to stop his descent.

A square hole had been cut in the floor, and the boards replaced so as to deceive the eye. The weight of his body had caused them to give way.

As he shot downward through this hole, his extended hands caught on the flooring at the sides and arrested his fall. At the same time a revolver flashed in the room in which he was now swaying and the bullet plowed its way with in an inch of his head.

He found he could not draw himself up and he feared if he dropped he would fall into some horrible pit. Neither could he swing there longer, for the sound made by the recocking of the revolver came to his quick ears.

It was a dastardly attempt at assassination; and the bold detective was never, in all his perilous career, nearer death than at that moment.

He knew that he must drop instantly if he expected to escape the next bullet. So, giving himself a tremendous swing, he hurled his body as near to the center of the floor as possible.

That muscular swing alone saved his life, as he shudderingly learned a few minutes after.

As he fell, the revolver again cracked, this time sending its missile high over the head of the falling man.

The detective struck the floor with a heavy crash, gave a deep groan and lay still.

The ruse was successful. The would-be assassin at once left his place of concealment, hurried forward and bent over the prostrate man. He was convinced, doubtless, that the last shot had taken deadly effect while the detective was in mid-air.

But he was destined to experience a startling and disagreeable surprise. As he bent above the detective, in the darkness, he was seized in a steel-like grip and drawn down upon the breast of his fallen foe.

In vain he squirmed and struggled. He could not break that muscular hold, and in another instant he found himself on his back on the hard floor, and with the detective's heavy knee planted on his breast.

"You bound! Do you know what I'm tempted to do with you?"

In his excitement Happy Hans forgot his dialect.

He drew a keen knife and pressed the point against the scoundrel's throat.

"Say a word or make the least attempt at escape and I'll drive that knife into your black heart!"

There was a terrible and deadly fierceness in his tones, and the man trembled like a leaf at that touch of cold steel.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FORCED CONFESSION.

THE words were followed by a suggestive "click," and a pair of handcuffs were snapped upon the fellow's wrists.

This was turning the tables, with a vengeance, and as the man felt the grip of the manacles he twisted and squirmed like an eel, in a vain endeavor to break away and escape.

"None of that, now!" warned the detective, again pressing the knife to his throat. "Do you want me to slit your neck for you?" I'm just in the humor to do it, after the occurrences of the last few minutes."

"What do ye want o' me?" growled the scoundrel. "I ain't done no more'n any other man 'ud 'a' done! I reckon you was calculatin' you'd rob me; and I tried to fetch ye down, as I would any other burgeler!"

The scoundrel's ready wit and audacity amazed the detective.

"I 'low you sawed a hole through the floor and thought you'd drop down on me while I was asleep; but you didn't."

He tried to laugh, but the attempt was a dismal failure.

"A nice little story!" observed Hans, dryly. "Especially when the short time you've had to concoct it is taken into consideration."

He proceeded to tie the man's legs together; then drew a match and began to scratch it upon his knee.

"Hol' on, jest a minit!" pleaded the captive, who feared the consequences of the revelation that would be made by the light. "You've got me foul, an' I don't deny it. Now, how much'll you take to lemme go? I'll make myself scarce; and'll swear to never come near ye ag'in, if you want me to."

"I'm not in need of money—that is, not in need of hush money, thank you!" continued Hans, as he gave the match another scrape on his knee.

"I'll give you a thousan' dollars!" cried the man, wildly. "I've got speeial reasons for not wantin' to be harnesssed up afore a court. What d'ye say to a thousan'? you can't make that much money any easier."

The detective made no reply to the appeal. He simply gave the match another rake; and, when it burst into a blaze, held it above his head and looked about the room.

The sight he beheld caused him to tremble, strong man as he was.

Just beneath the hole was a square of heavy planking, set thick with the gleaming blades of butcher-knives, their keen points directed upward. A fall upon them must inevitably have resulted in a horrible and agonizing death.

An awful and deadly look came into his eyes as he fully realized the nature and diabolism of this death-trap.

So fierce and burning was that look that the would-be assassin gave an involuntary scream.

For an instant it seemed that the detective meant to raise the scoundrel aloft and impale him on those gleaming knives. His face worked convulsively and his hands, closing with a

crushing and spasmodic grip, half lifted the terrified wretch from his position on the hard floor.

"No!" he cried, letting him fall back with a crash. "That would be to make of myself a murderer and his equal. Such a death would be too terrible for even a fiend to suffer. And yet"—lowering his voice to a horrible gurgle—"that is what the villain deliberately and coolly prepared for me. Talk of the devilish and refined cruelty of the Middle Ages!"

A series of low moans and cries were issuing from the lips of the unhappy wretch, who was convinced, probably, that his death was assured.

"Shut up!" cried Hans, giving him a heavy kick. "Don't tempt me, or I'll place you on those knives anyway. You deserve that fate, if ever man did!"

When the match glared up, it had revealed the stub of a candle on the table; and the detective now began to grope for this candle. He found it in a little while, and by the aid of its flickering and feeble light, surveyed the room.

It was almost empty, and its naked appearance brought out those gleaming knives in more fearful relief. The hungry square of planking seemed Death's stubble-field, set thick with poisoned javelins.

The bound and trembling man turned his head away from them and shuddered.

"There's where you'll lie, my fine fellow, if you don't answer promptly such questions as I put to you. A soft and downy bed it would make, now, don't you think? Ay, a veritable bed of roses!"

The fellow put up his manacled hands and moaned uneasily.

"I can see that blissful anticipations of lying there are running riot in your brain!" with a harsh and bitter laugh. "Well, you will not be compelled to lie there, if you don't lie here! If you do!" he gave a toss that was more suggestive than words.

"Now, what's your name?"

"Slim Pete!" came the answer, promptly.

"Well, Mr. Slim Pete, I can assure you that your work of to-night is not likely to be admired by an unprejudiced jury. It is the most damnable attempt at murder I ever witnessed or heard of, and my experience has been pretty large.

"But I am not disposed to deal too harshly with you if you speak up promptly. If I do not miss my guess, there is a greater villain behind you."

Slim Pete's face, as it revealed his struggles between fear and hope, was a study.

"You can ease your punishment very much, I assure you, by making a clean breast of everything!" prompted the detective, interpreting the look.

"You were hired to come here to-night and attempt to kill me. Is it not so?"

Slim Pete nodded an affirmative.

"And the man that hired you was?"

"Flavel Fox."

"Very good. You are doing first-rate, and I am sure we will get along very nicely together. And who suggested the construction and use of that very ingenious instrument of torture?" nodding toward the array of glittering knives.

"Same feller."

"Flavel Fox again, eh? I thought as much. Quite an inventive genius is that same Flavel Fox."

"Did any one assist you in any way here? I presume that delightful affair was constructed here? 'Twouldn't be a pleasant object to carry along the street, you know."

The man shook his head as a negative, but there was something in his manner that caused the detective to repeat the question in a different form.

"You had no aid, then! Was there any one in this house who *knew* what you were doing?"

"There was a feller know'd somethin' 'bout it, but he didn't help."

"And who was that gentleman, please, if you can remember without too great a strain on your intellect?"

"The lan'lord!" exclaimed the unhappy witness, relapsing into a spasm of terror. The questions were put to him in such a smooth, icy and polished way. Abuse and rough words would not have conquered him half so quickly. The detective's manner made him feel as if a deadly knife was suspended above his head.

"Our very kind friend, the landlord. I half-suspected as much. And he knew when I started to my room to-night that I was very liable to fall into your little trap? He must have been well paid for that, for it would have resulted in the loss of a lodger—and, as a rule, landlords, like other human beings, do not care to lose customers.

"Who paid him for his non-interference, and negotiated with him for this room?"

"Fox!" replied the victim, twisting uneasily.

"The same stealthy brute! And what did Fox tell you was the reason I was to be put out of the way?"

"He said you was shadderin' him fer somethin', and he was afeard you might git to be dang'r'us."

"I take it you are not the spy who was out on the corner last evening?" Hans questioned, bending forward and surveying the prisoner's face.

"'Twas another feller, that was!" Slim Pete protested, evidently not wishing to be held more guilty than he was.

"And what became of the spy?"

"Why, you see, boss, it was this-away?" Slim Pete explained, sitting half-erect. "That feller had orders to watch you an' report everything you done. Some way you slipped past him and got away. He found it out a little later. I calc'late the landlord told 'im you'd gone. Soon's as he found you'd throw'd him, he made tracks fer the Gold Mine."

"Right away Fox sent fer me, sayin' 'at he had a partic'lar bit o' work to do which'd pay me big. He brought me down hyer, made 'rangements with the lan'lord fer this room, give me my instructions an' set me to work. He 'lowed you'd be back afore mornin' an' that a tumble into the trap would settle you."

"I didn't know nothin' 'bout the case. He said you'd done him big dirt and was, he believed, tryin' to work a case ag'in' him that'd hang him. He promised to pay me well fer the job; an' stan' by me e't should ever be laid up ag'in' me. That's the whole truth, boss, so help me; an' I hope as how you won't bear too hard on a feller fer tellin' it!"

"If Fox is arrested and placed on trial—as he will be—will you testify to that in a court of justice?"

"Try me, boss! I'll repeat it every word, jist as I said it to you. I know I'm in a sling, an' I don't want to go to ther pen more'n other folks."

The detective could scarcely conceal the disgust he felt for this conscienceless, groveling creature. More plainly than he had ever seen it, was the fact there revealed that a villain can never trust his associates in crime. Hence the truth of the aphorism—and it is a truth—that "murder will out!"

"Well, I'll give you a trial, and if you tell the whole truth when called on, I will do what I can to lighten your sentence."

"An' there's more of it, boss!" the scamp exclaimed, chuckling, as this new hope grew in his breast. "There's a heap more of it, an' I reckon it's o' some importance. Flavel Fox is a-gittin' ready to leave this country. He tol' me so, on'y this evenin'. He said he wanted you put out o' the way, 'cause he knowed you'd foller him to the ends o' the yearth. At the same time, though, he was gittin' ready to skip. He's sold, er is tryin' ter sell, the Gold Mine, and I understood, is calc'latin' on puttin' all his money into greenbacks. When he goes it's my opinion he'll go between two days, an' Round-up'll never hear o' him ag'in'."

The news was, as Slim Pete observed, of importance. So much so that the detective showed immediate signs of uneasiness. If Flavel Fox should leave Round-up that night it would break the trail and necessitate a long and weary search before he could be brought to justice.

"Think you he will leave to-night?" Hans asked, anxiously.

"Don't 'low he will," said Slim Pete. "He wouldn't want to go until he learnt how this little affair had panned out. An', then, I understand, he ain't quite got all his bizness in shape. To-morrow night I figgered that he'd make a break; though he might 'a' stayed a good while longer if you'd 'a' gone over the range. What he'll do, now that I'm harnessed, I can't say!"

"Make a break, of course!" Hans observed. "And that is a thing that I must get ready to prevent."

At this moment a terrific blow was given to the door opening on the street, and a half-dozen men, with drawn revolvers, leaped into the dimly-lighted room.

The were led by Flavel Fox.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TIGHT PLACE.

It was a sudden and startling change of affairs, and Happy Hans realized that he was in a very tight place.

When Hans fell through the trap, the proprietor of the place was at the inner door of

that lower room, with an ear pressed against a panel. He knew from the struggle that followed close upon the fall that the murderous plan had failed. He remained only long enough to learn that Slim Pete had been surprised and worsted in the encounter, and then hurried with rapid footsteps to the Gold Mine.

His information created a decided sensation. Fox was in the gaming-room, at the table next to Nadine's. The whispered communication from the lodging-house proprietor caused him to immediately abandon the game and go in search of a number of his willing tools.

These were not difficult to find, for the Gold Mine was still crowded late as was the hour.

There was one vacancy, however, and Fox frowned and looked uneasy as he noticed it. Nugget Jim was not in his usual place behind the bar. That individual was, in fact, many miles from Round-up at that moment, fleeing as if his life depended on the speed of his horse. He felt assured Fox meant to slay him, and was hastening to put himself out of harm's way.

Selecting five or six trusty followers, Fox left behind him the flaring lights, the gamblers and the roysterers, and hurried away, to break suddenly into that little room at the lodging-house, as we have seen.

"No shooting, if it can be prevented!" he cried. "Take him alive, and we will put his light out by some less noisy method than the revolver!"

The words brought a suggestion to Happy Hans. With a lightning-like movement he dashed the candle to the floor, extinguishing it. Then he threw himself with all his force upon Fox.

The assault was so furious and unexpected that the drawn pistol slipped from the villain's hand and fell with a clatter. Then a desperate struggle took place in the darkness.

The ruffians could not see to assist their chief. An indiscriminate rush was as likely to injure as to aid him.

"Strike a light," some one shouted.

The command was followed by a scratching and popping of matches, and a scrambling search for the fallen candle. The red glow of the still smoldering wick guided this search, and, an instant later, the candle's sputtering light illuminated the room.

Fox's followers rushed to his assistance, and to the overwhelming numbers Hans was forced to succumb.

Fox was fairly frantic with rage, and, for a time, danced about like a maniac.

As for Happy Hans, now that he was bound and helpless, he took the matter as coolly and calmly as a philosopher of the Stoic school.

Slim Pete, treacherous, unreliable and double-tongued as a serpent, turned again to his master. No doubt he felt that safety lay with the winning side.

"Kill the skunk!" he howled. "Lemme loose an' I'll agree to finish him mighty quick."

"Shut up!" growled Fox. "Do you want to bring the town upon us? The way you barked in your job ought to suggest that you sing rather low."

"He's a reg'lar devil!" Slim Pete declared, in extenuation of his failure. "The thing was fixed all right, but he wouldn't tumble into it!"

Then, with much self-laudation and garrulity, he proceeded to a narration of the facts known to the reader and endeavored to exonerate himself from reproach. He closed with an appeal to be set at liberty.

"Where's the key to those bracelets!" asked Fox, turning to the detective.

"In my pocket," was the cold response.

Fox ran his hand into Hans's capacious pockets, found the key and set Slim Pete at liberty.

"I see you have dropped your Dutch dialect and your delightful pretense at verdancy!" with a significant sneer.

"I didn't think it worth while to keep up the play!" replied the detective. "Not while that agile scamp is around with his double-face and elastic conscience. I knew he would play me false and reveal all he knew at the first opportunity."

"What does he mean by that?" Fox asked, turning to Slim Pete.

"I reckon he's a-hatchin' up some lie er 'nuther!" Pete explained.

"My meaning is quite simple!" said Hans. "If all your men are as unreliable as that chap I'd advise you to discharge them and go it alone. It will be safer."

"You are a liar!" cried Pete, turning pale and trembling with fear. "I never blabbed anything; but you tried to get me to."

"I don't care to engage in a controversy with

you, my fine fellow!" Hans returned, coldly, "you'd swear away the life of your mother, if you thought it would serve your ends."

"So, you've been leaky, have you, Pete?" cried Fox. "If I discover that you really have, it will be a bad business for you!"

"It's a lie, I tell ye!" shrieked the scamp. "He wants to git me killed fer the part I took ag'in' him."

"As for what you told him it will never be repeated!" Fox asserted, with stinging emphasis. "Remember that. But if you get into the habit of talking too much, the words will choke you some time."

"Get a rope!"

"Why not pitch him onto the knives!" suggested Pete, sardonically. "That's what he wus goin' to do to you, boss!"

"I don't care for any suggestions at present. Some one bring a rope! With that stout beam overhead and a good rope it will take but a little while to place our detective friend in a position where his knowledge will not be likely to harm any of us."

He seemed to take malicious satisfaction in the threat, and watched the detective's face closely as he made it. But if he expected an exhibition of craven fear he was sadly doomed to disappointment. Happy Hans had faced death in too many shapes and forms to cringe and cower when the supreme and final moment seemed at hand.

"You think it a piece of bravado, eh, intended solely to frighten you? Well, you were never more mistaken in your life. You know too much for your own good and our safety!"

A man came hurrying in with a cowboy's *riata*, which he handed to Fox.

"Now, if you have any prayers to say, or any confessions to make," fingering the rope suggestively, "I'd advise you to be in a hurry about it. It's creeping along toward daylight, and we can't afford to fool very long."

"I have nothing to say," replied Hans. "I have tried to do my duty! I have made many mistakes and have some things to regret. But if I must die, I am ready!"

His coolness and courage in this trying hour surprised, while it angered, Flavel Fox.

"Up with him!" he commanded. "The puppy prates like a parson, and I always did hate parsons!"

One end of the rope was cast over a beam, the noose was placed about the detective's neck and the scoundrelly crew stood waiting the final order to pull.

CHAPTER XIX. A REVELATION.

BUT that order never came.

The door of the room was splintered by a heavy blow, that brought the proceedings to an instant stand-still.

Some flaming compound, like red fire, was thrown into the apartment; and, as its gruesome light flashed upward a score of men came tumbling in over the broken door, with drawn and cocked revolvers.

At their head was Nadine, the masked and mysterious Card-Queen.

Fox turned deathly pale; and his followers seemed uncertain whether to fly or fight. The first was out of the question, as a glance showed them, and for the last they had no great desire, in the face of those overwhelming odds.

"Surrender, Flavel Fox, you and your associates, if you place any value on your lives! If you lift but a finger, it will cost you dearly!"

Happy Hans looked sharply at Nadine, as that warning command fell from her lips. He was bound, helpless, and with the trailing rope about his neck, but his eyes had not been bandaged. In the voice of the Card-Queen there was something that thrilled him like the blast of a battle trumpet. There was a ring in its resonant depths that was strangely suggestive.

It is doubtful if Flavel Fox noticed the peculiarity that attracted the attention of Happy Hans. He was too greatly confused and startled to notice anything milder than the shattering crash of a thunderbolt. The sight of Nadine at the head of the invading force completely unnerved him.

"Why—why, Nadine, my dear! what is the meaning of this?"

For answer, Nadine tore the concealing mask from her face, drew herself up to her fullest height and leveled a revolver full at his breast.

"Great heavens!" shrieked the startled and astounded man, falling backward in a very paralysis of fear: "It is Basil King!"

"Yes, Flavel Fox! Your dearly beloved Nadine, the handsome queen of the card-rooms, is none other than Basil King, your bitterest foe.

"So, again I call on you to surrender, or I will send a bullet to your cowardly heart."

The knowledge that had so paralyzed Fox, wrought an equally depressing effect on his men. They no longer thought of escape or defense, but threw down their arms and begged for mercy. Foremost and loudest in his pleadings was the human weasel, Slim Pete.

As Happy Hans saw the antics of the rascal and heard his imploring words, he could not resist an immoderate fit of laughter.

"Pete, old pard," he cried, as soon as he could control his voice, "it seems that you were just a little bit premature awhile ago! If we could only project ourselves a short distance into the future, what a fine thing it would be now, wouldn't it?"

Slim Pete paid no heed to the taunt and interrogatory, but continued to beg for mercy.

"Disarm them!" King commanded. "We will treat with them afterward."

As he said this he stepped forward, and severed the ropes that held the detective.

"What of Fanny?" he whispered, as he bent over him, knife in hand.

"All right, and bright as a new dollar! I brought her into town an hour or two ago, and she's safe with friends."

For reply Basil pressed the detective's hand gratefully; then retreated and continued his supervision of the victorious force.

When the villains had been properly secured, Happy Hans asked an explanation of the cause that brought Basil King and party so opportunely to the rescue.

It was given with cheerfulness.

"But first admit me to appear again in my own proper garb."

With these words King stepped into the street and passed into the office of the lodging-house. He returned shortly, having discarded his feminine apparel.

"When that fellow came into the Gold Mine, this morning, on a dead run, almost, I knew that something important concerning our case—for I will call it our case, with your consent—had transpired. And when Fox at once left the card-table and began to rustle around with such speed, I decided that I would follow him and checkmate his movements if possible."

"So, I whispered to one of my men—there were two or three at the Gold Mine in my confidence and pay—to keep in sight and send me word where he went and what he was up to."

"As soon as Fox departed, I also left the gambling room and hurried another man off to secure a number of fearless and reliable fellows who could be depended on to do desperate fighting, if necessary."

"By the time they were assembled, my spy reported that Fox's party had you hemmed up in this place and seemed on the point of murdering you."

"I hurried my men at once to the rescue—"

"And was just in time to save my life!" exclaimed Happy Hans.

"There is more of my story," continued Basil, "and, as it has a direct interest for Mr. Flavel Fox, I will repeat it in his presence."

"Know, then, that my real name is Corliss Beeson, and that my father is the owner of the 'Double Bar' horse ranch!"

Both the detective and Fox gave a gasp of surprise.

"Such is the fact; and something in the nature of whim, rather than design, brought me to this place. My father really thinks me, at this time, in California. I started for there several weeks ago; but, getting in this vicinity, I concluded to stop off and study certain matters for myself, without letting father know anything about it."

"For some time father has suspected that false reports were being sent to him by the foreman of the 'Double Bar.' Such continued and phenomenal losses did not seem possible, unless there was crooked work somewhere. It was his idea that perhaps the foreman was in league with horse-thieves and shared the profits of their crimes."

"Before leaving home, he told me that he had become so annoyed over the matter that he had employed a certain well-known detective, Pink Parkman, by name, who would probably visit Round-up, disguised as a German."

"When I reached the place and began a few quiet inquiries, I became satisfied that Flavel Fox was a scoundrel of the deepest dye. But to prove it was another matter. It was then that I conceived the idea of assuming the role I have since carried out."

"I am neither tall nor robust in build and my face, you will notice, is almost as smooth as a woman's. I had a few straggling hairs on my

upper lip, which I fondly called a mustache, but these I devoted to the tweezers. By means of face-washes, false hair and cosmetics, together with the all-concealing mask, I was able to rig out as a very stunning Card-Queen. And really, friends, the part was not a difficult one. No one suspected my sex; and a modification of my natural tones proved quite deceptive."

"My idea was to insnare Flavel Fox and lead him to make some damaging confessions; and I frankly say to you I succeeded in both beyond my most sanguine anticipations."

"The first time I saw Mr. Parkman, in his Dutch disguise, I was convinced that he was the man spoken of by my father. He rather threw me off the track, though, when I called on him. Not being quite sure of my position I naturally feared to reveal to him my real identity. But when I coolly thought the matter over afterward, I became convinced that my first surmise was correct."

"At night I hung over the gaming-tables as Nadine, the Mysterious; and during the day haunted the bar-room and house as Basil King. Thus I became acquainted with Miss Fanny Elgin."

"Fanny learned that my visit to the detective was known to Flavel Fox, and that he had declared his intention of having me killed, and so sent me a note of warning."

"In answer to that note I met the young lady near the rear gate of the garden, that night. There I was attacked by a band of cowardly scoundrels that Fox had hired to assassinate me. Stricken to the earth I was left for dead, and the young lady was carried away. I have just learned from Mr. Parkman that he succeeded in rescuing her, a few hours ago, and she is now safe with friends in this town."

"I was not so badly hurt but that I recovered, after awhile, and crawled away. For two days I was so feeble I fairly staggered as I walked; and am not a great deal stronger, even now. Nevertheless, I donned my mask and female attire, and posed to the best of my ability as Nadine, covering up any suspicious circumstances by plausible excuses of illness."

"As you see," removing his hat and revealing an ugly gash on the top of his head, "the wound was quite a severe one. But my blonde wig concealed it; and any pallor of the face was hidden by cosmetics and the all-potent mask."

"By a bit of eavesdropping, I overheard Fox telling Nugget Jim where the young lady was kept, together with other important information, which I afterward rehearsed to Fox with telling effect, pretending that I had made my discoveries by a personal visit to the cabin in the mountains. I would have gone there if I had been able, for I feared, in fact, almost knew, that Fox would not release the young lady, in accordance with a promise made me to that effect. In my despair I wrote to Mr. Parkman, appealing to him to undertake the rescue; which he did, with entire success."

The story was certainly an interesting and unique one, and was greeted with frequent exclamations of delight.

"And, now, that your story is told and we are acquainted all around," said the smiling detective, "let's march these fellows to the Gold Mine Saloon, and, in the presence of the men still there, force Fox to reveal the location of the iron box, where he has deposited and hoarded his stealings."

The suggestion met with universal approval, and was at once carried out.

At first, Fox wailingly denied all knowledge of the present location of the box, but a few suggestive threats persuaded him to point it out. According to the confession, which he afterward made, almost its entire contents belonged rightfully to the Beesons; and to them the money was restored.

In due course of time the heavy hand of an outraged law was laid on the guilty men, and they were incarcerated for various terms in the Territorial prison. Fox was given ten years at hard labor.

But, he never lived to complete the sentence. He was a crushed and hopeless man from the hour of his downfall at Round-up; and died, two years later, in the mines, where he had been placed at hard labor.

Within less than a year after the completion of the events of this story, pretty Fanny Elgin, the "Angel of the Gold Mine," became the happy bride of Corliss Beeson, the son of the cattle-king.

As for Pink Parkman, he still follows his chosen calling, and is the same pleasant, jolly, heroic soul he was when introduced to the reader as Happy Hans, the Dutch Vidocq.

THE END.

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